THE
SAPLING
CAGE
MARGARET KILLJOY

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE SAPLING CAGE*

"[Killjoy]'s complex characterizations and in-depth worldbuilding are distinguishing."

—*FOREWORD REVIEWS* (starred review)

"A cracking, first-rate, epic coming-of-age fantasy novel. The crisis of gender identity only heightens the stakes (and suspense) of this propulsive, page-turning tale."

—CORY DOCTOROW, author of *Little Brother*

"To read *The Sapling Cage* is to witness the birth of a new classic. This is a book that will utterly transport you."

—SARAH GAILEY, author of *Magic for Liars: A Novel*

"Simple, strange, and elegantly effective, *The Sapling Cage* begins Margaret Killjoy's anarchist fantasy series with an engrossing story of the struggles between tax-collecting knights, barfly thieves, and apprentice witches still too raw to use the magic they can barely see out of the corners of their eyes. There are goodies and baddies of all genders; there's bullying and monsters and healing rainbows and rotten, scheming nobles. This book was so gripping that, though I tried my best to slow down as the end came rushing nearer and nearer, I just couldn't do it. Now that I've reached the last page, the only thing keeping me from crying is the knowledge that there's more of Killjoy's glorious epic to come."

—NISI SHAWL, author of *Everfair: A Novel*

" *The Sapling Cage* is a compelling coming-of-age fantasy with impeccable vibes; witches, knights errant, and monsters populate a rich story about a trans girl finding power and community. It's also a reminder that fantasy can be a vehicle for so much: interrogations of power, knowledge, ethics, an exploration of how to live in the world."

—NINO CIPRI, author of *Finna*

"*The Sapling Cage* is a stirring, thought-provoking fantasy story that

grabbed me in the first paragraph and didn't let me go until I'd finished. If I'd been able to read this as a teenager, I think I'd have figured out some important things much earlier than I did."

—ROBERT EVANS, author of *After The Revolution: A Novel*

"An anarcha-fairy tale with the most ironically powerful moral of all—power itself is so dangerous that nobody should be allowed to have any, except over themselves!"

—NICK MAMATAS, author of *Sensation*

TITLES IN THE
DAUGHTERS OF THE EMPTY THRONE
TRILOGY

The Sapling Cage

The Sapling Cage

MARGARET KILLJOY

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For my mother

ONE

The alder tree was ancient, and its leaves and branches left sunlight dappled on the forest floor. It was also dead, and it shouldn't have been. Everywhere around us, the forest was waking from winter. Everything was bluebells and white trilliums and new buds on branches and bright green leaves. Everything was spring. Except the alder. Its bark was sharp with cold, like ice or like stone. Its leaves were gray.

"I don't think trees are supposed to be like that," Lane said.

We'd finished our morning work on the communal fields. Not a hundred yards away through the trees, horses ran in the pasture, excited to be outside after so many months of snow. I could smell rain in the air. It should have been a perfect day. But the alder was dead, and it shouldn't have been.

"Witchcraft," Lane said. That was her explanation for everything strange.

"It couldn't be the witches," I said. That was my defense of everything blamed on witchcraft.

She paced around the tree. It took her several paces for every lap. She was half a year younger than me—she'd just turned sixteen—but she was the one always trying to burn off extra energy. I peered at the frost gathered on the alder's bark.

"I see another one," Lane said. She took off running further into the forest and I caught up with her a ways away. A young pine was dead and cold, its needles gone gray. One shattered at the touch of my finger.

"Who else but witches?" Lane asked. "Trees don't turn cold."

"Only a witch could save it," I said. "You'll be able to save it."

"Oh, hurray," Lane said sarcastically.

"It's not that bad."

"I didn't make that deal. I don't think my dead mom's promise should mean anything." Lane and I started back toward the village.

"Witches get to wear those black skirts, though," I said. "And curse

people. And heal people."

"I'd rather be a knight. You know I'd rather be a knight. Why are you arguing with me about this?"

That was a fair question. I thought it over as we walked.

"If I was a girl, I'd pretend to be you and go in your place." I'd always wanted to be a witch.

"It's a shame you aren't a girl," Lane said.

I agreed. Not just because of the witch thing. One of my earliest memories was being glad that my name, Lorel, was as common for girls as it was for boys. Five years back, my mother had given up trying to keep me out of her face powder and paint. Lane had always been game to trade clothes with me.

Those were the only two people in town who I talked to about how I should have been a girl. I had enough social problems already. When I was little, maybe seven, I'd told my friend River to call me a girl instead of a boy, and he'd just punched me, right then and there, without thinking about it. My mom thought my nose was broke, and a traveling witch had to set it for me. River apologized, and maybe he even meant it that he was sorry, but he'd made it seem like the whole thing was my fault—like I'd scared him or something.

So, yeah, only my mom and Lane knew about the dresses and the paint.

If I were a witch, though, I could turn the next person like River into a goat. Or figure out things like why those trees were cold.

"I'll do it anyway," I said as we walked through the fields of flax and barley.

"What?"

I started talking faster so I wouldn't lose my nerve. "When the coven comes through to take you, I'll tell them I'm you, and I'll go off and learn to be a witch."

"You're a boy," Lane said.

"Girls are allowed to be knights now, why can't boys be witches? And besides, it's not my fault I'm a boy."

"It's still true."

"I can pretend."

Lane walked up next to me and threw her arms around my shoulders. "What if you get caught?"

"I won't get caught," I said. "Strangers always think I'm a girl anyway."

My mother and I ran the stables. There were more popular roads than South Ede, and there were more prosperous towns than Ledston on South Ede, but we still saw our share of wayfarers. Most were on their way to Port Cek to our east or Deadman Castle to our west, and most of them had

horses, and most of them stabled with us overnight. We served knights and mercenaries and merchants and brigands, and I was just reaching an age where grown men took not a small amount of interest in trying to figure out my gender. I didn't have even a hint of a beard, my shoulders were narrow, and I had my mother's sharp features.

"These are witches, though," Lane reminded me. "They can see more than other people can."

"Are you trying to talk me out of it?" I asked.

"No." She squeezed me tighter against her side as we walked. "I'm just worried. What will you tell your dads? Or your mother?"

"I won't tell Grell or Jorge anything." My dads had a home all the way in Port Cek. I lived with them every autumn for a month or so when the storms kept them on land. Most of the year I didn't hear from them, and their only contribution to my upbringing was the silver they sent my mother when they could. "Mom, though, she'll understand."

"I love it like I love the Baron," my mother said when I told her. That was about as close as she came to cursing—she sure didn't love Baron Ede. No one did.

She sat in her rocking chair, a clay mug of wine in her hand. I'd waited until after supper to tell her, because she never took news well on an empty stomach. I didn't either, come to think of it.

She took a long draw off the mug. "You're old enough to make your own mistakes."

After that, she didn't say anything at all. Which was kind of worse than her yelling at me, really. It left me with nothing to do but stand around—there was only one good chair on the porch of the stable house—and come to my own conclusions about why it was a bad idea.

I didn't want to do that. I'd made up my mind, so I tried not to linger on what the witches might do to me if they found out. Or what knights sometimes did to witches.

"I'll get to learn magic," I said. "Real magic. Cauldrons and curses, and maybe I'll even learn how to fly."

"What is it that you think witches do?"

"They travel around doing good things," I said. "They help some people and hurt some people, depending on what they deserve."

"That's what you want to do? Help some people, hurt other people? Since when have you liked hurting people?"

"I don't know, Mom. Since never, I guess."

It was my turn to grow quiet. I'd probably learned that trick from her. The cicadas were out, and early too, filling the air with their rising and falling song. The town drunk said it was going to be an irrational year, one of those years where the seasons don't do what they're supposed to

and crops fail. No one paid him overmuch heed, but the cicadas really shouldn't have been out just yet.

"There's no way to disguise yourself," my mom said, breaking the silence. "Not forever. You don't look it now, but you're going to grow into a man."

"By then, I bet I'll have magic enough to hide it," I said.

"I won't hear the end of it, never, not from Grell."

When she invoked my birth father's name, I knew that was basically the end of it. She'd given up. I was my mother's child, through and through, and she knew I didn't care what Grell thought. I hadn't inherited anything from Grell but skin half a shade darker than my mother's olive.

"This is it then," she said. She poured the dregs of her wine off into the grass to honor the dead, as she did with every cup. "The coven is going to be by soon enough, and you're going to lie to them, and you'll learn to be a witch. Not a sailor, not a knight, not—Nethers forbid—a stablemaster, but a witch. My son, the witch."

I nodded, grinning. She hadn't stopped me. I knew deep in my heart that if it was truly a terrible idea, my mother would have tried harder to stop me.

"What's Lane going to do, while you're off being her? She want to learn to run a stable?"

"She's going to be a knight."

"Of course she is." My mom sighed. I knew she wasn't happy about me leaving. I knew she wanted someone to care about the stables, about Ledston, the way she did. But that wasn't me. It wouldn't have done anyone any good for me to pretend otherwise.

Witches don't really keep proper schedules, but most years they made their way down South Ede around Mother's May, the spring holiday. I figured I had about a week to prepare myself.

The witches didn't know Lane by name; they were just coming for the daughter of Leona of the Lead now that she'd seen sixteen years. I started sleeping over at the Lead manor in case they came at night. The house was a decrepit shell, really, the rock walls overgrown with vines and half the lumber taken to rot. Lane did what she could to maintain it, but she'd lived there alone for three years. She spent most of her days working the communal fields and hadn't the skills or resources for serious repairs.

The manor was a shadow of its former glory. "Lead Manor, Dead Manor," Lane called it, rhyming the name. A few hundred years ago, Lane's ancestors had founded the town to mine lead, then sworn fealty to some baroness or baron. Serfs moved in, and those who weren't mining took to farming on the communal fields. A hundred years back, collectivization had swept through the lowlands, and the baron had

allowed it rather than lose power completely. Lane's family stayed richer than most of the rest of us, but only through trade and inheritance. They no longer ruled and they no longer took tax, only the baron did either of those things. By Lane's mother's time, the family barely had enough to maintain the ancient manor.

The first night I spent there, waiting for the witches, Lane led me up treacherous stairs to her parents' old living quarters. We had to pick our way carefully across the sagging floor in the lamplight.

"I'm going to bring this place back to glory," Lane said, tugging her shirtsleeve free from a protruding nail. "I'll be the first knight protector Ledston's had in fifty years."

"You really think you'll come back?" I asked.

"You won't?"

"I mean, I'll visit my mom," I said. "Sometimes."

"We could use a village witch," Lane said. "Just think of this place with a knight protector and a village witch!"

"Too much world to see," I said. Since I'd made up my mind to join the witches, I'd spent half my time, waking and asleep, imagining all the things I was off to see and do.

We stopped before a heavy cherrywood wardrobe set in the corner of the master bedroom. Its hinges were faded brass, but gold filigree still gleamed eternally bright along the door panels. Before Lane's mother died, she had always kept us out of this room. After Lane's mother died, Lane herself had solemnly told me that this wardrobe was off limits.

Lane selected an iron key hung on a chain from her belt and held it aloft so we might appreciate the seriousness of the moment.

"You ready?" she asked.

I nodded. I could scarcely wait.

She opened the wardrobe. Black skirts and dresses hung from hooks. Stockings woven in intricate patterns lay in a pile. Jewelry, finely crafted from plain materials, glittered beneath the glass lid of an ebony box. I'd studied at the loom enough to know the long days it took to weave a few yards of flax or wool. This was the accumulated wealth of a life.

"My mother left pretty clear instructions for when I left to join the witches," Lane said. "I was to bring a short dress, a long dress, a warm cloak, a winter skirt, and three pairs of stockings. So pick out whatever you'd like."

My own dress. I would have my own dress. Two of them, even.

I spent most of an hour making my decision, modeling each garment in front of the mirror on the inside door of the wardrobe. Not even Leona of the Lead had ever owned a smooth glass mirror, so my image was distorted. That suited me fine. It let me imagine how I ought to look.

I let my hair down out of its topknot. Long and straight and black, it framed my face well. I'd have worn it down all the time if I could.

Though I was much taller than Lane, I was nearly the same size as Leona had been. Most of the dresses sat funny across my chest since I had nothing to fill them out, and even fewer of them were loose enough across the hips to hide the bulge between my legs, but in the end I found two that fit me just right. Both were high-waisted, which made my legs look longer and my torso shorter. One linen, one wool.

When I wore those dresses, I couldn't stop smiling.

"You're beautiful," Lane said. She was smiling too. She thought for a minute, then dug through the wardrobe. She pulled out a necklace. A black stone pendant hung from a delicate steel chain. She held it out to me. No one in town had anything so nice.

"Your mother didn't say anything about taking any jewelry," I said.

"She's dead. Take it. As a thank you."

I took it and put it on. It hung just above the low neckline of the long dress, the stone cool and comforting against my chest. Despite how I was born, I was going to get to be a witch. Despite how I was born, I was going to get to live as a woman.

Lane squeezed me. She was crying into my neck. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Of course." I started crying too.

I slept in my long dress that night. I wanted to get used to wearing it, and also I just didn't want to take it off. I slept in one of the empty rooms in the manor. A windstorm howled outside and branches cracked in the distance.

I dreamt about a witch with translucent skin. I saw her skull and her veins and her teeth like I was looking through foggy glass. She was a real woman, a real witch, who'd wandered through town when I was an infant. I'd dreamt about her ever since.

That night, though, I was a witch, and the glass-faced witch was with me, next to me, tied to me with thick hemp rope. We were in a boat. Hands lifted us out of the boat and threw us overboard, and we sank, and I was drowning, tied to the glass-faced witch.

Mother's May came and went with no sign of the coven. No word from anyone passing through, either, though of course I had to be careful with my inquiries. Witches weren't beloved everywhere across Cekon. None of the baronies outlawed witchcraft outright, but not everyone knew and appreciated the social utility of witchcraft, and very few of the knightly brotherhoods would raise a hand or a sword to protect witches. Some knights saw witches as a threat to their power and hunted them. If I told the wrong knights we were expecting witches, I might even get them

killed.

Most of the news was talk of strife far to the north. Duchess Helte had pressed some ancient and dubious claim and annexed some baron's holdings. The news felt impossibly distant.

I tried to make myself useful at the stables, but as the days wore on, I got more and more anxious and distracted. One day I forgot to fasten a buckle and a passing merchant fell from her horse and injured her back. After that, my mother told me it was about time she got used to running the place alone anyway, which left me with too much time to worry.

What would witches do to an impostor? Would they kick me out, turn me into a sow, or kill me? They'd probably just kick me out. Maybe.

My mother took to eating dinner with us at Lane's house, particularly after she fired me and I spent more of my time baking and cooking.

Five days after Mother's May, I was reaching my breaking point. We ate on the back porch, where the overgrown garden kept away prying eyes, and I wore my short dress. The sun was just below the horizon. We were mopping up the last of a turnip and barley soup with fresh-baked bread, and I just couldn't keep my feelings cooped up anymore.

"I give up," I said. "This waiting, it's going to kill me. Or the witches will kill me, or people will kill me for being a witch. Better I just give up. I'll go be a sailor or something instead. Sailors see the world too."

Lane looked up, her brown eyes just starting to go wide with fear. If I backed out, the coven would take her instead.

"You can do anything you want with your life, Lorel," my mother said. I always knew a lecture was coming when she used my name. "And I don't wish you were off to be a witch. But you made a promise to Lane."

"I didn't say I promise," I said. As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I regretted them.

"Saying you promise isn't the only way to promise."

"It's okay," Lane said. "It was nice of you to offer, but if you back out, it's okay."

I didn't like my mom being mean to me and I didn't like Lane being nice to me. I didn't like much of anything at all.

The Ledston bell tolled, twice.

The Ledston bell rang once for friendly knights and merchants come to town, twice for friendly brigands and witches and other people the Baron didn't approve of, three times for royalty, and cacophonously for any of the above who looked like they might stir up trouble.

"Never mind," I said, standing up. "I'll do it."

"Upstairs with you," my mother said to Lane. "Out of sight. You look too much like your mother."

Lane darted over and hugged me. She pulled back to look at me, like

she was trying to say something, then she gave up, shook her head, and ran into the house.

"Are you going through with this?" my mother asked.

I stood up straight, smoothed out my dress. "Of course,"
I said. "I made a promise."

My arms shook uncontrollably at my side as I walked to the center of town, and it was all I could do to concentrate on my breathing.
"We have come for the daughter of Leona of the Lead."

Five witches stood shoulder to shoulder in the center of the town square.

My whole childhood, I'd wanted to know about witches. It was always hard to separate rumor from truth, but I knew a few things. I knew that every full-fledged witch was the other's equal, for one thing.

Each of these five wore black from head to toe, despite the warm evening and the heat radiating from the cobbles beneath their boots. One was roughly my mother's age, with the ivory-pale skin and narrow nose of someone from the far north. Two of them were as old as anyone I'd ever seen. Two of them could scarcely have been twenty.

One of the youngest had a fresh wound cut across her face and stood with the help of a crutch. Two of the others had bandaged arms. They must have had trouble on the way. Maybe that was why they were so late. Most of them were armed with spears or axes or swords. The uninjured young one carried what looked like a birdcage, covered with a cloth embroidered in the indecipherable runes of witchcraft.

Behind them, a girl my age stood shyly, like she didn't know quite what to do. Another recruit, most likely. She wore the most beautiful black cloak, made of glistening sea-wool. Its hood had a long pointed tail. That was a good cloak for a witch.

"I'm Lorel," I said. I lie the best when I sort of just avoid telling the truth instead of lying outright, so I didn't mention that I only had one name. I stepped forward.

One witch, one of the crones, broke from the line and circled me, looking me over. The rest of the witches carried baskets of wicker on their backs, but this woman bore a casket, child-sized, instead.

"Lorel of the Lead," she said.

My name was just Lorel, as my family bore no titles, but who was I to correct a witch who'd likely been born before my long-dead great grandmother?

She stopped in front of me. "Do you come willing or merely accepting?" she asked. There was an old scar on her cheek, a crescent moon white against her dark olive skin.

"I come willing," I said. My voice wavered as I spoke. What had I

gotten myself into? With eyes as old and wise as hers, how could she not see right through me?

The witch smiled. Some of her teeth were yellow, some of her teeth were black. One of her teeth was capped in gold, another capped in pearl. The contrast between them all was unnerving. “Not many come willing, not these past years.”

“Why?” I asked.

She ignored my question and went back to stand in the line.

Only a handful of people had gathered to see the strange procession. The herbalist, a few farmers, the midwife—River’s mother. If any one of them said anything about me dressed up like a girl, the whole plan would fall apart.

My mother stood among the onlookers, balancing my wicker basket of clothes on her hip, holding it by one of the woven shoulder straps.

“Lorel of the Lead, I summon you into the Order of the Vine. Today and forever, you are Lorel of the Vine.”

I nodded. I knew no courtly manners for an event like this.

“Do you have anything to bring with you?”

“Just clothes,” I said.

My mother walked toward me then, setting the basket down by my feet. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes.

“You’ve been like a daughter to me,” my mother said. She winked, then hugged me for a moment. “Go off and be your best self.”

The crone looked between me and my mother for a brief moment, as if noticing the similarities in our features, but she said nothing.

With no more formality, the line of witches turned and walked out of town. I grabbed my basket of clothes and hurried after. They hadn’t seen through me. I was going to be a witch. I wasn’t shaking anymore. I was grinning.

TWO

For half an hour or more, we walked in silence. Even the nightbirds seemed to grow quiet at our passing.

We left Ledston, but we didn't stay long on South Ede. Not a few hundred paces from the stables, we cut north into the hills on an old hunter's trail.

I knew this part of the forest well. Madrone and pine crowded out the night sky, but if we followed the right paths, we'd find our way to the only mature grove of birch in the barony.

A few of the witches carried tallow lanterns, and the faint light cast strange shadows among the trees. The youngest witch hovered near the other recruit and me, a faint smile on her lips. She was as willowy as a tree, with a wide nose, and she held that mysterious birdcage instead of a lantern.

After we turned south along the creek, I knew where we were headed. Another five minutes and we were there.

The long-abandoned hut had walls of rough-hewn marble blocks, some as large as a mule. It had been built by giants, I'd heard. It stood just at the edge of the creek, though a thousand years of erosion had begun to wear away at its foundation. A glint of the gibbous moon reflected off the water, but it was hard to see the building clearly in the dark forest. That didn't matter. Lane and I had been there a hundred times. When we were younger, we'd climbed over the roof to pretend to be brigands fighting off imaginary knights, or we'd dug holes in the ground nearby to plant an imaginary garden. The past few years, we'd come just to talk, to sit in the window frame and watch birds in the trees nearby. We'd never stayed overnight, though. It was haunted, we'd told one another. Witches probably slept there and did their magic in the firepit at its center.

We'd been right, apparently.

The coven formed a semicircle around the ten-foot-tall doorway, and the young witch herded me and the other recruit to the side.

It was one of the crones, the one who'd inspected me in the square, who broke the spell of silence. "Lorel of the Vine, present yourself."

The other recruit stared at me, her eyes filled with … what? Worry? Fear? Certainly, whatever the initiation rite entailed, it wouldn't hurt me. Would it?

I approached the semicircle.

"When you were nothing but a whim in your mother's belly, myself and two others of the Vine drove a monster away from Ledston. You've heard this story?"

I nodded. This witch must be Dam Alectoria, because her two companions died on the tusks of Sir Hillock the Monster after he'd transformed himself into a boar. I'd heard the story a thousand times in a thousand ways, because the confrontation had taken place on market day and everyone who saw it seemed to have seen something slightly different.

"Why were you promised to the Order?" Dam Alectoria asked.

"To replace the lives the Order lost defending Ledston," I answered, without thinking much about it.

"No," Dam Alectoria said. "We lost two lives, yet we only asked for one. Why were you promised to the Order?"

The question caught me off guard the second time. I looked at the other witches as though their faces might betray the answer.

"Because …" I stammered. I thought hard about the little I knew of witches. Pacts and bargains were so much a part of the stories. "Because everything must bear a cost?"

"Not a cost like merchants might ask," Dam Alectoria said. She smiled at my answer even as she corrected me. "But power without sacrifice is the only real evil in this world. Ledston wanted us, wanted the power we represent. We asked for sacrifice to maintain balance. This is the first lesson, the lesson which all the others come from. There is no good in this world. The two opposing forces at work are balance and evil."

"What if I hadn't wanted to be a witch?" I asked.

Alectoria's mesmerizing smile grew wider. "Then balance would have come in other ways."

I was that balance. Since Lane hadn't joined the witches, I had. My mother had made that sacrifice in place of Leona. Had she known that?

The middle-aged witch began a song. I didn't understand the words, if there were words, and the melody followed no pattern or notes I could recognize. It was an alien music, unsettling. More like birdsong or the cries of foxes than the music that people make. When a second witch joined her, though, she harmonized somehow. Then a third. Then the singers stepped aside and formed a triangle around us.

It was magic. For the first time in my life, I was witnessing magic.

The strange music felt like a wall around me, holding me in. The world beyond the singers was an endless expanse of red light. The trees were gone. The hut was gone. The other recruit was gone. It was just me and the witches. I was dizzy.

"Lorel of the Vine," the witches said, each in their own voices but so coordinated it was like one entity spoke through them. The three singers somehow continued to sing while they spoke. "Will you accept the teachings of the Order?"

"Yes," I said.

"Will you pursue balance and accept the cost of power?"

"Yes," I said.

"Will you protect your sisters of the Vine and accept their protection in return?"

"Yes."

First one singer dropped the thread of the music, then another. Finally, the third sang one last note, and the wall of sound went down. The red plains disappeared and the forest returned. It was like I'd been spinning and suddenly I'd stopped.

I couldn't decide if I should throw up, sit down, or pass out.

I passed out.

I woke just before dawn with the first morning call of a thrush. Birdsong reminded me of the witches' eerie song the night before, and the magic it brought about.

I opened my eyes and stared for a while at the smooth bronze skin of the large madrone tree above me, its limbs like muscles. I was on my back on a flat rock beside the river. Cold seeped through the stone and into me, and I had only a threadbare wool blanket for warmth, yet I'd slept well.

Someone had put me to bed.

Someone might have seen my body.

Frenzied with fear, I lifted the blanket to check, but I was still in the same dress I'd worn the night before. I turned on my side and saw a few witches still sleeping, with one quietly preparing a morning fire. I hadn't been found out, then, or they would have left me. Or worse.

I should have been sore after sleeping on rock, but when I stood up, nothing in my body complained. I'd never had a better night's sleep.

"Morning, whelp," the young witch with the wound across her face said to me. She leaned heavily on her crutch, but her shoulders were broad and she looked strong. The wound across her face was healing badly, a stripe of blood red edged by the gross pale white of dying skin. It ran from her temple to her chin, just missing her eye.

"I'm scarcely a whelp," I said.

“If you make it a year, you’re an apprentice. Then, when we decide you’re ready, a witch. Right now, though, you’re a whelp.”

“Okay,” I said, though I still bristled at the label.

“I’m Dam Lament,” she offered by way of introduction.

It had always seemed strange to me that witches used the same formal titles as knights. A woman knight was a dam, a man knight was a sir. All witches were dams, of course. Would I be a sir?

“Lorel,” I said.

“I know.”

Of course she knew. I blushed my embarrassment.

“You know how to handle a boar spear, Lorel? You’re a tall enough girl.”

“I’ve never used one,” I said, stumbling over my words. “The other … I mean the boys in my village …”

“Wouldn’t let a girl in on the hunt, then?” Lament asked.

Something like that. The men in town had always brought boys along to hunt, and occasionally one of the older girls, but I’d never been invited. I was too scrawny. Too feminine.

“Well, today you’ll come with me. I bet you know this area.”

“I do,” I said. “This hut, my friend Lane and I come here all the time, and there are crayfish in the creek, and if you go about ten minutes upstream, you’ll reach a pool where …”

But my audience was walking away from me while I rattled on.

“Whelp Hex,” Lament said, nudging the other recruit with the foot of her crutch. “It’s time to be up.”

“I want to sleep,” the other recruit said, curled on her side. Lane always complained when she was woken up, too.

“The Great Mother never sleeps, and it’s a curse that any of us must at all,” Lament said.

“To rot with the Great Mother. Sleeping is great, and it’s not even daytime yet, not really.”

“Don’t care, don’t care, get up or I’ll turn you into a fish.”

Would she really? She sounded like she meant it.

Hex rose to her feet. She was a few inches shorter than me, but wider set and strong. No one could replace Lane, not really, but I was happy I might find a friend.

“Grab a spear,” Lament told her. “We’re off to hunt.”

I took them up a trail to the pool at the base of the falls. Lane and I had seen deer drinking from the water there, as well as occasional boar tracks.

The spear Lament gave me was half again as tall as me. It had a witchbladed spearhead—that’s what I’d heard it called when the blade of a weapon looks like a flame or a slithering snake—and a crossbar

underneath the head to keep whatever you stabbed from continuing to run at you. It was hard to walk through the trees with a long pole like that. Hex looked comfortable with hers, keeping it out of the low-hanging branches while staying aware of its blade.

Lament walked without her crutch, though a look of pain sat on her face and she took occasional sips from a glass vial from her pouch.

"Is that a potion?" I asked the second time I saw her drink from it.

"It is."

"If you have a potion for healing, why do you have a crutch?" Before she answered, I submitted my own suggestion. "Is it a balance thing?"

"Oh, this is every bit as much a crutch as the one I left at camp," she said. "It's something that will keep me together while I heal. It doesn't do the healing for me. You'd have to be in a place of great magic to make a potion like that, and it wouldn't keep long on the trail even if you did."

The sun inched over the horizon while we walked, and soon we stood on the rocky shore at the base of the falls.

"It's beautiful," Hex said. She hadn't spoken the entire walk.

She was right. There are prettier waterfalls in these hills, but the Giant's Shower was a wide ribbon of water that fell twenty feet into a perfect swimming pool.

"How does this work?" I asked. "It takes a full hunting party to bring down a boar, doesn't it?" I didn't want to kill a boar. I didn't even like killing rats in the stables.

"Yeah, but we're witches, so we're going to cheat," Hex spat out, glaring at Dam Lament.

"Can you see the magic in this place, Lorel?" Lament asked. "It's coming up from the water, like mist."

"No," I said.

"Then this is your first lesson. Magic flows through the world like winds. Sometimes it follows waterways, or veins of ore, or root systems, or wanderers. It's always changing course, and it's always taking different routes. It's always in motion, though it moves faster where it's hot and slower where it's cold. That's why the most powerful witches stay in motion themselves. They follow the chaotic winds of magic."

"I think witches stay in motion because everyone hates them," Hex offered. She picked up a stone and skipped it across the water. It disappeared behind the falls.

"Whelp Hex, you will learn discipline," Lament said. It was impossible to read her expression through the wound on her face. "If not because respecting your teachers is its own reward, then because if you can't control your own chaotic nature, you'll never control the chaos of magic."

"To rot with magic," Hex said. "To rot with the Order of the Vine, and

to rot with both of you." She took a step closer to me, her spear held across her chest. The blade gleamed sharp in the morning sun.

I didn't panic, because I didn't have time to panic. She shoved me with the haft of the weapon and I lost my footing and tumbled backwards, crashing into the cold, cold water. It was snowmelt, the kind of water that will leach every bit of your warmth and strength and cause your muscles to seize. Some mornings, I loved to dive into water like that, to feel the shock of it. But I'd never done it in a linen dress, and I'd always done it by choice. I spluttered and dragged myself up onto the rocks, gasping for air.

I lay on my back, heaving, staring at the dawn but unable to focus on anything except the cold and my surprise.

"She …" I tried to get out, "she …"

"I saw," Lament said.

I staggered to my feet and looked around. Hex was gone.

"Did you …" I could barely speak between chattering teeth.

"I didn't turn her into a fish, no," Lament said. "She ran off. Back to camp, I assume. I don't interfere with the quarrels of whelps."

"Yeah, well, thanks for nothing," I said.

"We'd better get you out of that dress, warm you up." Lament took a step closer to me.

"No!" I shouted. The witch stopped in her tracks. "No …" I said. I fought to keep my limbs from shaking. "I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" Lament asked.

"I'm fine," I repeated. I couldn't be found out. Not so soon. "Can we get back to the lesson?"

Lament stared at me. She was probably trying to figure out my motives, trying to figure out what was going on in my head. Three breaths later, she nodded.

"Every school of magic perceives energy differently, because learning to see magic is learning to apply a metaphor to reality. When I look out at the pool at the base of the falls, I see a flowing mist of color. Mostly turquoise, with some streaks of lavender running throughout. The blue and the green would particularly help cast any curse that calms or paralyzes its victim, while the purple is good for causing ill fortune. I see what my sisters would see, what you will one day see, because it's what we've trained ourselves to see.

"To perform magic, I siphon the energy, called ley, into my working. An iron magician from the kingdom of Oxley would see a writhing mass of phantom blades, and he would find the tool he needed and grasp it by the hilt, pulling it free and using it to carve reality to his whims. A Metlurian animist, if she made it to the northern half of the world, would see a single life force, an entity. A faerie. The animist would ask the faerie

for a boon."

Shivering made it hard to focus on her words, but what she said was fascinating enough to distract me from the cold a little. My first lesson as a witch.

"It's the same energy," Lament continued, "but all three of us would perceive it differently, interact with it differently. Not only that, we'd be able to accomplish different works."

"How can there be a faerie in this lake at the same time as there isn't?" I asked.

"That's the power of words, of teachings. The way in which we understand the world shapes our ability to interact with the world."

"What if I learn your way … our way … and later learn to see the faeries? Would I be able to see the ley and the spirits both?"

"No," Lament said. "At best, you would have to choose. More likely, your brain would choose for you. It can only support one framework at a time. Holding two competing worldviews would tear you apart, as every time you saw energy the two ideas would war in your mind."

"I'd rather see faeries," I said.

"You say that only because you've never seen them, and because you've never spoken with an animist about the toll consorting with fey would take on you."

I knew she was probably right, but that didn't mean I didn't want to see faeries.

"So what are we going to do with this magic coming off the water?" I asked. "Hex said we're going to cheat."

Lament took a tiny vial from her pouch and uncorked it. A vile odor of tar and sickly sweet rot poured out into the air. Lament dipped one long, sharp fingernail into the black liquid within. I watched closely, mesmerized. A single drop sat on her nail, and Lament knelt down beside the pool.

"Great Mother, every child must sleep," she incanted, as she dipped her finger in the water. "Great Mother, every child must dream."

I tensed up, waiting for a blast of magic, or for the world to turn red around us like it had the night before, or for … really for anything to happen.

Nothing did.

Lament stepped away from the water and ushered me toward the tree line a few paces from the rocks.

"Now?" I asked.

"Now nothing," Lament said. "Now we wait."

"What did you do?"

"Now we wait without talking."

I shut up.

It was cold in the shade, and I felt rivulets of water running down the small of my back, dripping down into my shoes.

I couldn't go home. I wasn't allowed to complain. I couldn't do anything but wait.

Lament stood next to me, towering over me, and it bothered me that I couldn't figure out what she thought of me. Was I even safe? She hadn't intervened when Hex had attacked me. Would she intervene if a boar did?

After an interminable wait, which could have been ten minutes or an hour but felt like a month, a fawn came out of the forest and approached the pool. It looked around nervously for predators, then reached its neck down and drank its fill.

One large flat rock jutted out over the pool. I had dived off that rock half a hundred times, sunned myself on that rock half a hundred times. The fawn saw a patch of sunlight on the rock and walked into it. It was beautiful. It lay down and went to sleep.

Lament had poisoned the water with a sleeping spell, but instead of a boar, we'd caught a fawn.

"Kill it," Lament said. She said it like she was commanding a horse, firm and unwavering.

"What?"

"Aim for its neck, that will kill it quick but keep the meat good."

"It's a fawn," I said.

"Kill it, whelp."

I hesitated, the boar spear in my hand.

"Kill it!"

I stepped out from the trees and approached.

Is this what it took to be a witch?

The fawn slept soundly, curled in on itself, its head tucked between its legs, its back covered in white spots. It couldn't yet be a year old. If it was without its mother, its mother was likely dead. If I didn't kill it, a wolf would.

The spear was heavy and awkward in my hands. I could press the blade against the creature's throat, then step down on the cross guard. That would be easier.

The spearhead was shaking. I was shaking. Maybe I was crying. I was cold and miserable and I didn't want to kill anything.

"Kill it!" Lament yelled, louder than before.

The spear clattered against the rock when I dropped it, and I fell next, collapsing from stress and fear. I put my arms around the baby deer, and it was warm, the only warm thing I'd felt that morning. I cried.

"No," I said, loudly at first, then I whispered. "No."

My clothes and my eyes were both almost dry by the time we made it back to camp empty-handed. Dam Lament said nothing the entire walk. By the end of it, she was struggling some with her wounded leg. Her potion must have worn off. I offered her a shoulder to lean on, but she ignored me.

The sun had long since cleared the horizon, and the witches were up and about. Three sat in a triangle a few paces apart from one another in some kind of meditation, while Alectoria stirred a cauldron that smelled like barley.

Hex sat by the stream, her legs dangling into the water. She looked up as we approached, but looked away just as quickly.

Dam Alectoria approached Lament, offering her the crutch.

"Anything?" she asked.

This was it. Lament would say that I didn't have what it took to be a witch, and with luck, they'd just send me home.

"Nothing," Lament said. "No luck."

"A shame." The older woman walked off.

"Why did—" I started to ask.

"Look, whelp. I wanted meat to thicken our stew. You wanted to save the fawn. You got what you wanted, and I didn't get what I wanted, and that's the way the world works sometimes. I can't exactly force you to kill, can I?"

She hobbled off without another word.

I didn't understand witches very well at all.

A rock splashed in the water, startling me. I turned, and Hex was throwing stones into the creek. It wouldn't do to make an enemy of the only girl my age—better that I clear the air between us. I approached.

"I understand what you meant by cheating," I told her.

"Leave me alone, whelp." She threw another stone, this time at a tree on the far side of the creek.

"I couldn't do it," I said. "I couldn't kill a baby deer."

"Well aren't you just as high and noble as the Duchess."

She threw another stone. She had perfect form, and it cracked into a dead branch, scattering pine needles into the wind.

I didn't say anything, because I couldn't figure out what to say.

She didn't say anything, because clearly she didn't want to.

I walked away and ate porridge by myself.

THREE

I think most of being a witch is walking.

It suited me fine that we spent the whole next day walking. Staying in motion was a good way to avoid focusing on my troubles and fears. We didn't move fast, owing to Lament's leg, but no one seemed to begrudge her slowing us down.

The witches were more talkative in the morning, and I finally met the rest of them. Dam Ilma was the second crone. Her skin was a pale and sickly gray, her skin an intriguing maze of wrinkles and folds. She was as fat as Dam Alectoria was thin, and the two of them walked all day without any sign of tiring.

The middle-aged witch was quiet and always seemed to have a smile on her face. Her name was Dam Sorrel. She was so calm, pleasant, and unassuming that she was, somehow, the most frightening. It wasn't just the sword at her waist and the shield on her back.

The witch with a birdcage wasn't a witch yet at all, it turned out. Rose was Dam Sorrel's apprentice. She was also, alongside Dam Lament, assigned to shepherd us whelps. Rose and Lament didn't always walk with us, but they constantly kept eyes on us. Rose answered my questions and seemed to delight in anticipating them. I liked her immediately.

The seven of us followed hidden but well-trodden trails that Rose called witchways—winding paths that most closely aligned to the movement of magical energy. Some of that energy flowed like rivers and streams while some buffeted around like winds. Leypaths, leylines, leywinds, and leystorms. At least, that was what Rose told me. I still couldn't see or sense any of it. Rose told me that would come in time. I tried to take her word for it.

Most of the day, I just stared at the woods as we walked past. I did ask Rose about her birdcage, but she simply shook her head. I knew almost nothing about the runes—witches adorned their clothes with them sometimes, but none of the witches who'd passed through Ledston had

ever spoken about their meanings.

Our path took us west, roughly parallel to South Ede. Twice, the trail spat us out onto the cobbled trade road itself, once to make use of the Landsman River Bridge and once to skirt a marshy patch. Each time, before we stepped out onto the road, Dam Ilma went ahead armed with a fistful of magic charms to make sure we wouldn't run afoul of any knights. Dam Alectoria was never far behind.

"Why do those two walk up front?" I asked Rose in the evening when we stopped to refill our water skins in a creek.

"Witches get more powerful as they get older," Rose said. "Not just because of experience and learning. The crones say it's that their bodies become more comfortable with the earth and the ley."

"It's a curse," Alectoria grumbled, walking over. I'd assumed she was way out of earshot. "Your body wants so hard to return to the earth that everything you do hurts. My body won't respond to half the commands I give it, but the earth responds twice as well. One reason we follow the ley is that some of us—none in this coven, but some of the crones you'll meet soon enough—would literally fall apart without magic."

"So you're up front because you're, I don't know, the most sensitive to the ley? Or because you need it the most to keep going?"

"No, you half-wit," Alectoria said, without a trace of anger or frustration in her voice, "we're up front because if we run into people who don't like us, we'll destroy them."

Not an hour later, we stumbled out of the woods into a glade. The sun was low in the sky, turning the early stalks of wild wheat a golden-red hue, and the nightflowers bloomed sapphire and purple. A storm gathered on the eastern horizon behind us. In the west, the sky was a wash of fire. I didn't know that I'd ever seen something so beautiful.

If only my mom, or Lane, were there to share the experience with me. I didn't want to cry, not in front of the coven, but loneliness came over me like I'd never felt it before. It was like how I felt at the end of every summer, leaving Ledston for Port Cek. But in Port Cek, I had my dads and a few friends. With the coven, I had no one.

I could sneak off somewhere soon and cry alone.

No. I was Lorel of the Vine, a whelp and soon a witch. I didn't need to cry anymore.

As the path wound through the glade, an ancient manor house came into view, just inside the forest on the far side of the clearing. Its thin spires of white marble jutted above the canopy, each with wooden plank stairs spiraling around their exterior. These were the watchtowers of the old kingdom. There were a few along the road to Port Cek, but these were out of the way, in the forest, incorporated into the manor.

The manor was built in another forgotten style, only a single story tall aside from its towers, with gray stone walls that wove through the trees of the forest, broken by mismatched glass windows. Its towers might have kept watch over the forest for half a thousand years, while the house built around them had likely only stood for a couple hundred.

What it must be like to live there! The forest at your back, the glade at your front, and the Old King's watchtowers to look over it all!

The path turned from packed dirt to cobbles as it approached the manor, and the silent line of black-clad witches in front of me marched up to a sort of stone pavilion at the front entryway. Ilma pounded on the wooden door three times with her massive fist.

The door opened on its own, and we went in.

We sat in silence in a small entry hall. A narrow bench lined each wall, and two witches sat on each one. Rose sat between Hex and me on the floor against one wall. The small casket Alectoria carried like a pack rested against the wall next to her feet.

The only light came from a window set into the ceiling, and soon it was dimmed by the coming of a storm and the fading of the day. Rain beat a slow rhythm against the glass, and lightning occasionally cracked the sky. There were only two doors: the one we had entered through and another at the opposite end of the hall.

Every inch of the wooden walls was carved into elaborate forest scenes. In some, animal-headed humans hunted human-headed animals, but these were few and far between. It was mostly just tree after tree, carved deep into the wood.

The gloom was overwhelming, and my feet hurt more than they'd ever hurt before. We were waiting for something, but I didn't know what, in a manor carved with scenes of what strange death might await someone in the forest. I wasn't scared, though, I realized. Alectoria, needle-thin, and Ilma, imposing and powerful, seemed more than a match for anything that might come our way.

Just as the shadows grew too deep to make out detail in the carved reliefs, the front door slammed open and a slight man tromped in, holding a lantern in front of him, with a dead goat slung across one shoulder. For a moment, he was silhouetted against a flash of lightning. Then he used his lantern to light a series of thick, well-used candles on a table by the door, and I could see well again.

He looked like the kind of man who prefers life in a dusty cabin and only comes to town once a blue moon. He wore rawhide breeches and a blouse and a belt hung with three knives, and his skin was as dark as a southern sailor's. A vicious smile cracked white through his black-and-white beard, and he looked at each of us in turn, meeting our eyes.

There was something to his gaze, some sort of spell. He held my eyes for half a moment and I felt his power.

Another figure came through the still-open door. A girl, maybe my age or a year or two younger. Her hair was black and straight like mine, but her eyes were a much lighter brown. She held a dead rabbit in each fist and walked with none of the solemnity of the older man—her father, I guessed. She shared his coloration if none of his features.

"Three witches new since last you spent an evening," the man said. He looked at the three of us on the ground. I didn't like him looking at me.

"Lord Eddercop," Dam Alectoria said, rising to greet the man, "only a new apprentice and two new whelps. I present to you Rose of the Vine, who came to this coven only lately, after her sisters and her previous mentor were destroyed. I present to you Whelp Hex of the Vine, a child of the ocean sent as balance. I present to you Whelp Lorel of the Vine, a child of the country sent as balance."

"Under my roof and in my manor, you are blessed and you are welcome to the well. You are welcome to the table, you are welcome to the stable, you are welcome to the nights and to the days. Obey only the law of solace."

"Thank you," Dam Alectoria said, as though she understood what he was talking about. "We would join you in dinner and leave with the sun."

Eddercop nodded. The door to the outside swung shut and the door to the inside swung open. Magic, I assumed.

I should have been scared, probably. Eddercop meant "spider" in the Old King's tongue. It was a name I'd heard before, from the eldest men who'd passed through Ledston. Eddercop was the name of a dryad.

I smiled. This was the life I was meant to live.

Since no one seemed particularly bothered to keep an eye on me, I spent the time before dinner wandering the halls of the house. It wasn't just the entryway that was decorated. Every wall of every room was covered in forest scenes, carved in the same style and perhaps by the same hand.

The manor was unlike any building I'd ever seen or imagined. From the outside, it was massive. Inside, the rooms were tiny, windows were rare, and it felt more like a cave than a house. I walked with a candle lantern held at my side. I saw no one, and I saw no sign that anyone but the man and the girl lived there.

I passed through parlors and long-empty bedrooms, through studies and libraries, and eventually I came upon a music room. A lyre sat on a stand in the corner, and a harpsichord dominated one wall. Both were carved with forest scenes. A skylight let the stars peer into the room.

"Do you play?" I heard as I inspected the harpsichord. I turned and saw the girl standing in the doorway.

“No,” I said. “My dad plays a little at the public house in Port Cek.”

She brushed past me to take a seat on the stool, cracked her fingers, and played while I stood and listened. A complex song, her fingers moved too fast for me to track. After a few bars, she tripped up on the rhythm, slammed her fists on the keys, then started over. She reached the same part and messed up again. Fists against the keys. On her third time, she went slower, and though her tempo kept slipping in and out, she made it through a whole movement of the song.

Grell had always played simple songs, sailor songs. Whatever this girl was playing, it was something completely different. A forest song, I decided, dense and intricate.

She stood up, grimacing. Clearly she wasn’t proud of her performance.

“What’s your name?” I asked her.

“Araneigh.”

“Are you Lord Eddercop’s daughter? Are you dryads?”

“Yes and no, to both questions,” she said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Come with me into the forest,” she said instead of answering.

“What?”

“I want to show you something.”

She didn’t speak in poetry the way her father—or her not-father—did, but her words were riddles nonetheless.

I followed her, of course. She was the first person who’d offered me anything close to friendship or real kindness, even if she was a creature of the forest.

We left the manor through a side door, its handle and hinges hidden in the carved wall, and were immediately in the thick of the woods. The rain had slowed to a drizzle, falling onto the leaves of fruit and nut trees. Black walnut, white oak. Crabapple, mulberry. The forest, at least right here, was cultivated.

Araneigh led me through narrow, twisting paths; the single candle of my lantern was scarcely enough to light my way. She could have been leading me anywhere. She could have been leading me into a web. She could have been planning to eat me. It was too late to turn back.

I didn’t want to turn back.

She stopped in the darkness, and I didn’t notice in time and ran into her. She laughed, and as simple as that, I trusted her.

“I’m going to show you something horrible,” she said, “and then I’ll show you something beautiful.”

She turned to a fir tree next to her.

“Touch it,” she said.

I did. It was as cold as snowmelt. I jerked my hand back.

She walked a few paces further, and I followed her, and the temperature around us dropped to winter. My lantern lit frost all around us.

"There were trees like this back at home," I said. "What is it?"

"My father calls it colddead, but won't tell me more," Araneigh said. "He doesn't know what causes it, though, I've figured that much."

I touched another tree, then another. They were like pillars of ice. A sense of unease swept over me.

"It's horrible," I said. Two trees had been bad enough. An entire forest was something awful.

"Now something beautiful," she said, and she grabbed my hand and ran back toward the manor.

Stairs, narrow and treacherous, led up to the roof of the house. Above the trees, it was bright enough to see without the lantern. Araneigh took me to one of the watchtowers, walking up the narrow stairs without a banister. I followed her, though I felt a little queasy as we walked into the sky and the whole forest opened out beneath us. No, the whole world, out to the mountains in every direction, lit by the moon. The stars crowded the sky. The view was worth a little fear.

"You were right," I said. "It's beautiful."

"I just wanted to look one last time," Araneigh said.

"One last time?"

"I'm coming with you, in the morning. I'm going to be a witch."

I didn't hide my smile.

We were late to dinner, and all eyes turned to the pair of us when we walked into a dining room barely large enough for its long table. Rose looked relieved when we arrived. Dam Lament looked angry. Lord Eddercop was inscrutable. Hex … Hex looked like she would flay the skin from my flesh if it were in her power.

Araneigh went to sit next to her father, and I sat in the only place available—next to Hex.

Dinner was goat and rabbit, charred and served alone without ornament or spice. Four bowls of rough salt and four bottles of red wine sat in the center of the table. We ate off of clay plates—their rims carved by the same hand as the walls, it appeared—and drank straight from the bottles, each passed around the table widdershins. The wine was thick, almost brandy. It went to my head fast.

Even though I'd seen the dead goat—and its nonhuman head—with my own eyes, I imagined it hunted like the creatures in the art around me, as a human-headed animal. I drove the thought from my mind because the day's hike had left me starving and I didn't want to turn my stomach with worries like that.

“On your journey, were there three dead men?” Lord Eddercop asked from his throne-like chair at the end of the table.

“No,” Dam Alectoria replied. “We had no trouble.”

“Trouble follows witches whether you’ve seen it or not,” Eddercop said. “Since the days were last darkest, since the nights were last longest, there’ve been troubles.” He took an entire leg of the goat in his hand—though he was not a large man—and bit into it. Blood ran down into his beard. He made no move to wipe it clean.

“There have,” Alectoria agreed.

“Why?” Eddercop asked.

Alectoria sighed. I perked up my ears to hear. “When have you known witches to pass freely?”

“A hundred years ago,” he answered. He answered like he’d been there. Perhaps he had. “There’s a bad hunt coming.”

When Eddercop said “a bad hunt,” Dam Alectoria reached up and touched the crescent moon scar on her cheek.

“We know a bit about the bad hunt,” Dam Lament said. I looked at her wounds with newfound curiosity.

“I hope my daughter will survive.”

“I make no promises to you, Lord Eddercop,” Alectoria said.

“Of course.”

With that, the conversation ended. For a moment, we were silent but for the sounds of eating and drinking. Eventually, the witches began to speak with one another in low voices about the day, about spells, about the flow of ley across the land. No one spoke about the things I wanted to know, however: who was Lord Eddercop, and who was Araneigh? What was the bad hunt that was coming? What was the colddead?

I sat between Hex and Rose, and neither one talked. Neither Eddercop nor Alectoria said another word, and I ate my dinner of flesh, drinking thick wine to wash it down.

When I stood at the end of the meal, the room spun fast. Had someone drugged the wine?

No, it was just wine.

More wine, and thicker, than I’d ever had. I’d grown up with wine at supper, but always watered. My mother drank her own wine watered more often than not.

I steadied myself on the chair.

“Whelp Hex,” Dam Lament said, “help Whelp Lorel to bed.”

“No,” I said, “I’ll be fine.”

“I can do it,” Rose said, starting to stand.

“Let the whelps take care of one another,” Dam Lament said.

Was this revenge, for the hunt the other day? Some kind of lesson? Or

was she just oblivious? I took a step toward the door, but for some reason stumbled and fell to my hands and knees.

"I'll help her," Hex said. How could the witches not hear the malice in her voice?

She got an arm under my shoulder and helped me to my feet.

"No," I said again. "I've got it."

Someone laughed. It might have been me. I couldn't tell.

"Come on," Hex said. With her to steady me, we made it out of the dining room and through the maze of halls.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I'm putting you to bed," Hex said. I wanted to believe her.

As we walked—well, as I staggered with help—through the manor, the forest decor took on a new level of creepiness. The trees blurred past me, the bloody hunts blurred past me, and there was something deeper, darker, hidden in those woods. I was lost in that forest, and I didn't want to find the monster at its heart.

We made it to a bedroom with two simple cots. There in the doorway, still ten feet away from the nearest bed, Hex let me go. I stood on my own feet. The room was spinning still, but less than it had been. I'd be alright.

I took one step toward the bed.

Hex was watching me, waiting for me to fall.

I took another step. I could make it.

I took a few more steps and was almost to the bed. I could somehow taste how comfortable it would be to lie down, to sleep, to let this endless day of marching end.

Hex kicked my leg out from under me.

I fell and hit my face on the edge of the cot, which tumbled over atop me.

"You're the dumbest girl I've ever met," she said.

I cried. I curled into a ball and cried, there on the floor, while my tormentor stood above me. Witches aren't supposed to cry. Sixteen-year-olds aren't supposed to cry.

"Leave me alone," I said. "If you can't be nice then just leave me alone."

"Stupid girl," Hex said. She nudged me with her foot, as if she was going to kick me again, then stomped off to the far side of the room.

I wanted to go home to Ledston. The monster at the center of the house, I was pretty sure, was Hex. I wasn't scared of the witches, I wasn't scared of our host, I wasn't scared of witch hunters or beasts or demons or the Duchess. I was scared of Hex. I was scared of what terrible things she'd say or do to me next.

With her eyes on me, I righted my cot, lay down, and tried to sleep.

It took a long, long time.

Daylight broke through a skylight, and I was up and out of bed with a newfound resolve as soon as its first rays found my face. I would see this through. I could handle Hex. I was a witch—well, I was going to be a witch—and you don't mess with a witch.

Hex was still asleep, so I walked on the balls of my feet across the room until I stood over her. I wasn't sure what I would do to her until I saw her hair, in three long braids hanging almost to the floor. I tied them to the thin wooden frame of the cot, simple as tying up a horse. Then I left the room.

I followed the sounds of voices back to the entry hall, where I found the entire coven waiting. Our host was nowhere to be seen, but Araneigh was there, in a beautiful but simple black dress.

"Where's Whelp Hex?" Rose asked. "Still sleeping?"

I heard a distant crash and guttural yell.

I kept my face neutral as best I could. "I think she just woke up."

FOUR

We left the manor and headed north, following a wide creek toward its source in the mountains. Araneigh came with us. Half the day later, with the sun at its highest point, the witches initiated her into the Order of the Vine. They waded out into the creek, dangerously close to the top of a waterfall, and sang their ritual song. Since I was outside the ritual space, I wasn't transported to a field of red but rather watched as the witches themselves flickered in and out of sight.

Water flowed right through where they should have been. They were in a different world. I had been in a different world.

Next to me, Hex glared.

"What's your problem?" I asked.

She kept glaring.

After the ritual, Araneigh slept in the shade of an oak for nearly an hour before we pressed on. We were out of the forest, walking a well-trodden path that wound alongside the creek as it cut across a rocky field.

"I've never felt anything quite like that," Araneigh said. She, Hex, and I walked at the back of the coven.

"I hated it," Hex said. "I hated feeling so out of control."

"It wasn't so bad," Araneigh said. "But I guess I grew up around magic."

"Did you come willingly?" Hex asked. "Or did they make you."

"That's … that's hard to answer. I always knew I was promised to the witches. I've always known I would wind up here."

The three of us talked most of the afternoon. It wasn't a three-way conversation, though. Hex and Araneigh talked, and Araneigh and I talked. We were competing for Araneigh's attention. We must have both wanted a friend. At least, I did, and I assumed Hex did too. Araneigh complimented Hex's sea-wool cloak with the tail on the hood; I shared her admiration but kept it to myself.

The path got steeper as we pushed further into the mountains.

Eventually we were climbing on switchbacks, and it was hard going.

"We just left Ede," Araneigh announced when we crossed a stone bridge over a ravine.

Just two days' hike and I was further north than I'd ever been in my life. I'd never been outside the barony. A hundred and fifty years ago, when the kingdom of Cekon still had a monarch, the border between the baronies and duchies and earldoms within it might not have mattered so much. But they certainly did now. And I had left the barony.

Late in the afternoon, we left the main road and walked into a strange town on a narrow stretch of flat ground that wrapped around the side of the mountain. On the east side of the path, stone buildings with slate roofs perched perilously on the edge of the cliff. On the west side, residences were carved into the mountain itself. To the north lay more pine forest, the same as we had walked through already.

There were still hours before sundown, but we saw no one on the street or in any window.

The town stood in the shadow of two towers above it on the slope. One was black and built of the distinctive large stones used by giants, so tall it rivaled the mountain peaks. The other was green-and-black granite, smaller in every way. Both were ancient, standing in defiance of gravity and time.

"This town must be Umbrin," Araneigh told me and Hex. "The giants built their tower to watch over the human workers. The other one was built by the humans, during their revolt."

"We heard you've called upon the Order of the Vine," Dam Ilma bellowed into the empty street.

Long moments passed before a man, gaunt and lightskinned, came out of the nearest house, deep bags under his eyes.

"Your sister was here before you," he said as he approached. He wasn't afraid of us, nor was he enthusiastic in his greeting. He was simply tired. "She has not returned from the woods."

"One witch came alone?" Dam Alectoria asked. "When?"

"She came yesterday," the man said. "Said her name was Dam Fia. Young, but strong and confident. Said she could help us with our troubles."

"What troubles?"

"First came the blight. A month past, now, the trees between us and the mine, they're …"

"As cold as snow," Alectoria finished.

"Aye. And with the forest dead, game is scarce. We're a mining town, though, so we didn't worry too much about the forest. Until the monsters."

“Tell us about the monsters,” Dam Lament said.

“As tall as two men, as white and bright as the moon. Too many arms. Too many eyes. Arms all around them, eyes all around them. As if you took a man and spun him like a top.”

The man had no emotion in his voice. He’d lost too much, I realized, to feel anything at all.

“And?” Dam Lament asked.

“And anyone who goes into those woods, through those woods, they don’t come back. Everyone young enough, they’ve gone away, mostly to The Gate. But we have debts, to the Baron and half the traders in Port Cek. If we don’t reopen the mine …”

“I understand,” Dam Alectoria said. “So Dam Fia went into the woods yesterday, and she hasn’t come back?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Dam Alectoria turned to the rest of the coven, her question unspoken. One by one, the witches nodded—we would investigate.

We strode through town. Faces appeared at doorways and windows, each more hungry and tired than the last, watching us as we went.

At the far end of town, wooden carts stood full of picks, augurs, lanterns, and other equipment for mining. Beyond lay the forest.

It wasn’t impressive, as far as forests went. Young birch, mostly, interspersed with older firs. But every tree bore gray leaves or needles, and frost glistened on bole and bough in the late evening sun.

“Like a man spun round like a top?” Dam Sorrel asked. She had drawn her sword and held it at her side, her shield tight in front of her body. Even ready for battle, she seemed so calm and friendly, like she was going to invite us for tea and pastries. Rose was at her side, alert as well. Whenever she wasn’t watching us whelps, Rose was at Sorrel’s side.

“Helgirden,” Dam Ilma said. “Children of the Nethers, in the old tongue.”

“No one has seen those since before there was an Order,” Dam Alectoria said.

“They might be drawn to the blight,” Dam Ilma said. “Or they might have been summoned to it.”

“That’s why Dam Fia came,” Dam Sorrel said. “And why she came alone.”

“Why’s that?” Araneigh asked. I thought the witches might be angry at her question, but Dam Sorrel answered her patiently.

“She’s a summoner more powerful than a witch her age has any right to be,” Dam Sorrel said. “She talks with demons and beasts, studies their languages. That kind of work is best done alone. You don’t want to startle something with fire for eyes and spells for skin.”

“Then why hasn’t she come back?” Araneigh asked.

“Maybe they didn’t feel like talking,” Dam Lament said. She took a long swallow from a vial of potion, set her crutch down against the nearest cart, and hefted her spear. She kept an eye on the nearby trees and she kept an eye on us, her charges.

“The three of us whelps should stay here in town,” Hex suggested.

“No,” Dam Lament said as she started into the woods. “That wouldn’t be safe.”

The sun cut through the thin trees and cast harsh shadows on the icy ground. The pattern of black stripes against the white was hypnotizing, and I spent most of my energy trying not to slip on the ice while still keeping up. Rose and Lament walked behind us, and I was glad for their protection.

“There’s not much ley here,” Dam Ilma said. She walked in front, a lantern held aloft in her heavy fist, with Alectoria just behind. “Dam Fia might have had the right idea. Talking might be our best bet.”

“Where there isn’t ley, there is always steel,” Dam Sorrel said, her voice still sweet.

“We’re close,” Dam Alectoria announced. A moment later, I saw how she knew. Bones hung suspended between trees, tied together with sinew in intricate three-dimensional patterns and geometric shapes. They were everywhere. They weren’t sun-bleached old bones, either. They were yellow and raw. Most bore the marks of teeth and claws.

“To rot with this,” Hex mumbled under her breath. “To rot with this.”

I didn’t blame her, though I didn’t quite share her fear. I was uneasy, but I wasn’t terrified. I was fascinated. Lane and I had spent the free hours of our childhood in the woods, and we’d stumbled upon dead animals and bones more times than I could count. This was different. This was art. Some of the bones, I surmised, had come from humans, and they’d been turned into something equal parts beautiful and horrifying.

It wasn’t that I was particularly brave. It’s that in the company of the witches, it was impossible to imagine myself hurt. It was impossible to imagine any threat that Alectoria, Ilma, Sorrel, Lament, and Rose couldn’t handle.

We skirted past the bone sculptures and soon walked along the edge of a steep embankment.

“There,” Ilma whispered to us.

I looked where she looked. Through the trees, through the bones, I saw it. Just a glimpse of moon-white flesh, bright as the aspen bark. Just a glimpse of too many arms and too many fingers. A helgirden. A creature so ancient and rare that I was now one of the few among the living who’d heard of its existence, let alone seen one.

It saw us, too, because it ran off into the trees.

The witches formed a line facing where we'd seen it last, with us whelps behind them.

Three of the creatures came running at us from the side and the front, breaking through the frozen limbs of trees but dodging around the sculptures of bone.

As they ran toward us, they grew smaller. No, that wasn't right. As they ran toward us, they stayed the same size in my vision, not growing larger as they should have. They broke my depth perception, and it hurt to look at them.

I couldn't tell how far away they were, or how large they were, or how many arms or how many eyes they had. Just that they were running toward us through the trees.

Fear didn't come into my mind, not that I was aware of. I just shook.

Dam Ilma took a glass ball out of a pouch and threw it in the air.

"Halt!" she called, casting her hands above her head. The glass shattered in an explosion of pale green light, and the helgirden froze in place.

"Can you understand me?" Dam Ilma asked, her arms still raised.

One helgirden answered with what sounded like bird song.

"It says yes," Dam Alectoria said. "In one of the languages of the Nethers."

"Why have you come to this forest?" Dam Ilma asked.

The helgirden answered.

"They were summoned," Alectoria interpreted.

"Where is our sister; where is Dam Fia?"

"They'll show us."

"Good," Dam Ilma muttered. She dropped her hands and the green light dissipated. "I couldn't have kept that up much longer anyway."

We followed the three monsters deeper into the dead forest as the sun began to set. Now that they moved more slowly, I could see the helgirden more clearly. Each was the height of an adult human and walked on two legs. Instead of a chest and shoulders, their bodies were cylindrical, with a ring of arms just below their necks. Their heads were terrifying to look at, with two rings of eyes and endless rows of teeth that circled the mouths at the tops of their heads. They sang their birdlike song as we went, but Dam Alectoria didn't translate for us.

We hadn't gone far before we reached a tiny clearing. A witch in a black cloak stood in front of a circle charred into the frozen ground. A helgirden was buried up to its arms in the middle of the circle, and the witch and the monster were talking quickly and excitedly in the language of the Nethers.

“Dam Fia,” Dam Sorrel said.

The witch looked up at us and took off her hood. She couldn’t have been much older than Dam Lament, but crow’s feet ran deep by her eyes. Her red hair was thick and curly and was cut short like a sailor’s.

She told us that the helgirden had been summoned by whoever had killed the forest. That, based on tracks, she figured the summoners had just left a few days prior. She told us that the summoning was a slow, painful process, almost a week long. The helgirden in the circle was only two days into its ordeal. The creatures didn’t know why they were here, or where they were, but they were bound to the forest by the blight. They’d spared her life because she spoke their language and had promised to help them return home. Her voice was melodic and she spoke like a sailor, with the characteristic trilled consonants.

The entire clearing was ringed with the bones of the helgirden’s victims, but sympathy came over me regardless.

“Can you free them?” I asked.

Dam Fia looked at me for the first time. She smiled, just the tiniest bit. “I think so. I can’t do anything until this one is through the portal, though.”

“How long?” Dam Ilma asked.

“Dismissing them should be faster than summoning them was. Another week for all four?”

“We’ll tell the people of Umbrin to leave you and them alone and stay away from the woods.”

“They’ll … they’ll probably eat at least three more people between now and a week from now. Three more people each.”

“Can they eat livestock?” Dam Ilma asked.

“Three or four horses total would probably do,” Dam Fia answered.

“We’ll tell the townspeople.”

“We ate all the horses ourselves already,” the man with the sunken eyes informed us when we told him the news.

“Cows, then?” Dam Sorrel asked.

“You think we would have eaten the horses before the cows?”

“What about those horses?” Dam Lament asked, pointing.

We all turned and looked. Fifteen mounted knights in full plate armor approached at a walk.

The townsman collapsed to his knees in despair. “Great Mother, Great Mother, Great Mother,” he whispered. “Not yet, not yet.”

Each of the knights wore a silver tunic with a golden circle at its center. I’d heard of that sigil before, but I couldn’t place it.

“Tax knights,” Dam Alectoria called out to the newcomers in greeting, stepping out in front of the rest of us. Next to me, Dam Sorrel’s hand

hovered near the hilt of her sheathed sword.

Tax knights. The newest knightly brotherhood, and, according to the knights and travelers I'd met while working the stables, the most arrogant among them. They weren't a real brotherhood, not really. They weren't real knights. The knightly brotherhoods were recognized across the whole of Cekon and were beholden to its people, not individual rulers. The Brotherhood of Helte's Coin followed Duchess Helte and seemed to exist only to exert her authority. But we weren't in the duchy.

"Out of the way, crone," the closest man said once he closed the distance.

"If I recall," Dam Alectoria said, unyielding, a slight thin figure in front of the armored, mounted men, "your Brotherhood only has authority in Duchess Helte's lands. And, if I recall, Umbrin is ruled by Baron Keikan. So you're armed strangers, come to a town we're here to help, and I'm afraid I won't step out of your way."

"No," the townsman said. His voice was a whisper, but it cut through the still air. "Baron Keikan has sworn allegiance."

"The simpleton is right," the knight said. "And we are here on a simple mission. To come for what's ours."

"The woods," the townsman stammered. "The blight. There's no food, no work. But the witches, they sorted it. Two weeks, that's all. Two weeks and the mine will be running and we'll pay you what we owe."

"Witches don't sort things," the man said. "They destroy.
Your woods are blighted? It was witches."

"No," the man whispered.

"They lay curses then claim only they can lift them," the knight said.

"It's not so," the man replied, but his voice dropped as he spoke.

"Fan out, search their homes," the knight ordered his subordinates. "Take everything of value. If anyone tries to stop you, witch or peasant, strike them. If they try a second time, cut them down."

"Please, Great Mother, please, mercy," the man cried out.

"The Great Mother doesn't rule these lands," the knight said. "Duchess Helte does."

"We'll be on our way," Dam Alectoria said, to my shock.

"See that you are."

And with that, we started away from the village, back toward the main road. Behind us, we heard shouting, the slamming of doors, and a general frightful clamor.

"We can't just leave!" Araneigh said.

"We have to," Dam Alectoria answered.

"There are more of them, sure, but we have magic. We can stop them, then feed them or their horses to the monsters in the woods, and everyone

wins!”

Dam Alectoria whirled in her tracks. Her eyes were wet and red from tears.

“If we interfere, we may as well kill every single man, woman, and child in Umbrin ourselves. We cannot start a war we won’t be around to fight. We cannot start a war we cannot win.”

Just then, a scream cut through the air. Somewhere behind us, a man was dying.

“Now, come on. We have to make it to the next town and find some horses.”

FIVE

We stayed that night in a roadside tavern nestled up against the cliff. The innkeeper sold us three horses. He didn't understand why we chose the oldest and the lame, nor did he refuse our silver.

Dam Sorrel and her apprentice set off back the way we came, the three horses in tow, walking them through the darkness into a haunted, dead forest to feed them to demons from another plane of existence. They would be back before dawn.

The rest of us crowded into one large room full of bunk beds stacked three high. I slept atop one, with Araneigh underneath me and Hex below her. Our baskets sat in a line by the door, but Alectoria's small casket was on the floor next to where she slept.

When I closed my eyes, I saw the helgirden. I imagined them at the window, and I scarcely slept at all. The first magical creatures I'd ever seen. Now I couldn't unsee them.

Perhaps I'd been more frightened than I realized. Perhaps only part of fear is how you feel in the moment. Perhaps part of fear comes later, when you try to sleep.

"There's a town up here, at the entrance to a valley between the hills," Araneigh said the next morning as we hiked in the sun. "It's called The Gate. I went there once with my father for business."

I was feeling better with the sun on my face and the helgirden further and further behind us.

"I've heard of The Gate," Hex said. "I heard it was built on the foundations of a giant's castle, and that the giant used to keep humans as pets. I've heard that the ghosts of those people still haunt the place, at dusk and dawn."

"You can't believe everything that you hear," Araneigh said. I saw no particular reason to doubt Hex's story, and I wondered what Araneigh knew that we didn't.

"You think we're here to pick up another whelp?" I asked.

“No,” Araneigh said. “I heard Alectoria tell Ilma that they were only going to pick up the three of us before we reach the covenant.”

“Covenant?” Hex asked.

“You were promised to the witches and you didn’t bother learning the first thing about them?” I asked.

Whenever a witch or coven had passed through Ledston, I’d asked them every question I could think of. Sometimes they had even answered me.

“No,” Hex said, sighing. “Tell me what a covenant is.”

Araneigh beat me to it. “A group of witches is called a coven,” she said. “At least four, and no more than fifteen. Five and thirteen are the best numbers. A covenant is a group of covens. Usually between two and ten covens. Larger than that, there’s the Order itself, all the hundred or so covens that make up the Order of the Vine. Most of the Order meets up during the coldest months, in a gathering called Endsmeet. It’s in a different place every year.”

“Are there other orders?” Hex asked.

“There used to be more,” Araneigh answered. “Five orders. Vine, Wand, Vessel, Wheel, and Arrow.”

“What happened to them?” I asked. “I never figured that out.”

“The Order of the Vessel sold their fealty to the mortal kings. They served for a few generations before King Sallow stole their secrets, put every one of them to death, and founded the Brotherhood of the Cup.”

“The healer knights?”

“Everything they know, they stole from witches.”

“What about the other orders?” I asked.

“Old King Sallow the Undying got them too,” Araneigh said. “Supposedly they were all wiped out a hundred and ninety years ago. From the year 313 till the year 317. The worst hunt, my father calls it. The Order of the Wheel was hunted down and burned, one or a dozen witches at a time. All timed with the phases of the moon. The ritual of undoing, Sallow called it. The Order of the Wand was poisoned in their Endsmeet. The Order of the Arrow was defeated in open battle. My father says there are still a few dams of the old orders, living in the mountains or at sea or deep in the forest. Or there were, a hundred and fifty years ago when he last checked.”

“How did we survive?” I asked. “Why did they spare the Order of the Vine?”

“No one knows,” Araneigh said.

“Dark magic, I bet,” Hex said. “A deal with a Nether lord.”

“Couldn’t be,” I said. “We worship the Great Mother.” I looked to Araneigh for support, but she shrugged.

Rose called for us then, and we went back to walking.

As we got higher, we walked through another graveyard of trees. In the light of day, each tree was its own gray tombstone, standing dead where it had once lived. Most were madrone, clinging to the side of the hill. When my mother used to take me into the woods, we sometimes came across burned forests. But in a colddead forest, there was no char or ash on the trees, nor any bright bursts of green growth peeking from the soil.

I couldn't help imagining monsters lurking just beyond my sight.

"Come along," Rose said, gesturing for me to return to the path. "It does no one any good to linger in a place like this."

"What is it? What causes it?"

"Nothing good."

"That's not an answer."

"We don't know the real answer, not yet."

It wasn't hard to figure out how The Gate got its name. The gatehouse of the old giant's castle still stood, a stone arch braced thirty feet up between cliff walls at the entrance to the valley. The rusted remains of an ancient iron door lay against one cliff face. We went through it into the town beyond.

A small market bustled just inside the gate. I tried not to let disappointment creep across my face. I wanted to see new things, amazing things. Nothing could compare to Port Cek's market, filled to overflowing with people and goods from across the world. The Gate's market, which was plenty big considering the small town, was full of livestock and tools and all things mundane and sundry. Nothing new. Nothing surprising.

At least I'd left the barony for the first time. Plus, I was headed to the highlands, where the fields were rich and the people were rich and it was all sunshine and good crops instead of mist and rain like we had in the lowlands. The highlands were paradise, according to every highlander I'd ever met.

Heads turned at our passing, which I suppose made sense enough. A coven will draw eyes anywhere, even without the spears and swords and shields we carried. It wasn't polite for visitors to travel armed, pretty much anywhere. In Ledston, we'd let knights get away with it, or the occasional brigands or witches who were too stubborn to conceal their weapons, but we were never happy about it.

Whispers surrounded us, faint shadows of words. Were people afraid of us? Were they angry?

One man came close to us, clearly curious. He was young, maybe eighteen or twenty at the most, and he wore the plain garment of a working peasant. In his hand, though, he held a basket full of egg-shaped rocks. He saw me looking and caught my eyes with a smile. He was

handsome. He looked so sure of himself as he strode past us in the market.

"Hold there, coven," I heard, then turned to look for the source of the voice. "The market is closed to you."

Three tax knights barred our path. New ones that we hadn't seen before.

The witches fanned out into a line, facing off with the knights. Hands hovered uncomfortably close to weapons.

"You'll be on your way, out and through town," one of the knights said, her voice strong and unwavering.

"No tax knight will bar my passage," Dam Alectoria said. She didn't shout, but her voice carried unnaturally strong.

"We have no quarrel with the Order of the Vine," the knight said.

"Then we'll buy provisions."

"We have no quarrel, but I am under orders to prevent you from commerce." She sat up straighter in her saddle and towered over the crowd.

"You see how those two statements contradict one another?"

"You may return the way you came or you may be on your way, but you will not linger and you will not trade."

"Great Mother, you people are insufferable." Alectoria actually raised her voice this time, putting a hint of magic into it, and her words echoed so loud they hurt my ears.

Some in the crowd cowered at the display of power, though many others seemed pleased to see Alectoria shout down the knights. To their credit, the tax knights maintained their composure.

"How can a woman claim to run a town she doesn't live in?" Dam Alectoria said, her voice returning to its regular, still remarkable volume. "Whelps, come here, it's time for a lesson. I will teach you how to lay a curse. What would be most appropriate? Pox? Clumsiness? Maybe a slow petrification?"

"I assure you, you will not survive the casting." The knight's two companions had crossbows leveled at Alectoria's breast. I wanted to see Alectoria destroy them for that. I wanted to help her do it. After what I'd seen and heard the other knights of the same brotherhood do at Umbrin, I wanted revenge.

"Hey! You lice! Eat Ilthurian rocks!" A voice cut through the silence. I turned—I think we all turned—just as the young man with the basket threw one of his rocks. All eyes followed the stone as it struck the lead knight square in the forehead of her helmet. She fell to the ground.

With that, the peasant took off into the crowd, his basket still in hand.

The two remaining knights tried to charge after him on their horses,

but the gathered crowd didn't seem fond enough of them to clear their way.

"We aren't going to help that man?" I asked Rose.

"He'll be fine," she said, pointing. I looked, and the rock-thrower stood on top of a nearby house, making rude gestures with one hand while tossing a stone with the other before sprinting away and leaping to another roof.

The fallen knight lifted her head and looked around confused, so Dam Ilma knelt down and whispered something into her ear. The tax knight moaned and closed her eyes. Her snores receded into the distance as we walked through town as quickly as Dam Lament could manage. There was no time to buy provisions.

We left the market behind and traveled a narrow path between rows of shanties before reaching the edge of town, well away from the road. We walked between plowed fields to the forest beyond.

We caught our breath in a small grove of fir trees alongside a wide and deep creek. Dam Alectoria set down the child's casket from her back, then she and Dam Ilma paced a circle widdershins, chanting. I wasn't sure what magic they worked. I wasn't sure whether the casket was part of it, or why she carried a casket at all.

"We ought to have killed them," Araneigh whispered to me and Hex. Hex nodded. "If you meet a predator in the forest, and it decides to hunt you, you have to kill it. Otherwise it'll hunt you every time you leave the house."

"We probably shouldn't have confronted them at all," Dam Alectoria said. Her hearing was uncanny. "I was just angry. I acted on that anger, which is rarely the right plan."

"Who was that man with the rocks?" I asked.

"He was an Ilthurian," Hex answered.

The Ilthurians, the outlaw knights, were a strange bunch. I'd only met two the entire time I'd worked the stables, but each had left an impression. They had their own individual codes of honor, and they spent at least as much time thumbing their noses at the nobility and the other knightly brotherhoods as they did righting wrongs and defending the weak. Instead of "Sir" or "Dam," each took the title Ilthura, regardless of their gender.

I'd never been tempted by knighthood, not even when Lane had gone on and on about it, but watching that man today had been wonderful.

Dam Lament was shaking, and she clutched tight to the haft of the battle-axe hidden beneath her cloak. She paced the circle, muttering, leaning heavily on her crutch. She wasn't casting magic, it took me a moment to realize, she was just trying to release her anger and fear.

“Alright, let’s not get ourselves over-worried,” Dam Alectoria said. “They didn’t try to hurt us.”

“No,” Lament said, “they just want to starve us out. That’s not better. We should have killed them.”

“Even if we’d managed to kill them without any of us getting hurt,” Alectoria said, “it would just make everything worse.”

“If we’re to join this coven, then it’s only right that you tell us what danger we’re in,” Araneigh said with an enviable confidence in her voice. “Why are tax knights trying to starve us out? What was the bad hunt my father spoke of?”

The four witches looked at one another, each in turn, silently determining who ought to speak. Then they turned to look at Rose, but she looked down, shaking her head, and Dam Lament spoke up.

“No one’s quite sure,” she said. “We’re trying to figure it out. It’s never been safe to be a witch, not really. Superstition says we’re evil, and some people put their faith in superstition. But lately, it’s been more than that. Since we broke up last Endsmeet, at least three covens have been destroyed by Helte’s tax knights. Each time, the pretense was some blight on the land. Two times it was just regular dead crops, but one coven was blamed for what your father called the colddead. Like the knights at Umbrin were starting to do to us before we left.”

“We’re convenient scapegoats for everything, ever, always,” Rose said.

“And you’re worried that the Order will be outlawed outright?” I asked.

Dam Lament nodded, and I beamed with pride about being right even as I realized the implications of what I was right about.

“It’s not going to help anything that this coven stopped a company of tax knights from making us the fourth before we picked you whelps up,” Dam Alectoria said.

A smile grew across Dam Lament’s wounded face. “They tried to arrest us, but we told them we wouldn’t live in chains. So they tried to kill us. We killed ten of them before they ran off.”

“They’re not entirely wrong,” Dam Sorrel said. Though I hadn’t spoken much with her, she reminded me of my mother—relaxed, hardworking, and often happily staring at clouds. “The thing we’re being blamed for, it’s a real thing that’s happening. The cold blight is everywhere. You saw it. When the knights found us, we’d just stumbled upon a dead forest.”

“Who would blight a forest?” Araneigh asked.

“All we have to do is find the cause of the blight, and then we can clear our name before things get worse?” I asked.

“It’s not as simple as that, whelp,” Dam Alectoria said.

“It could be,” Rose said. “And I hope it is.”

We set up camp by the creek when the sun was down near the horizon. A few of the witches and both other whelps went down to the water to bathe. I couldn't join them, of course, so I sat with my back to a tree on the bank and tried not to stare.

Rose and Araneigh were beautiful, and I felt guilty for thinking so. I'd known for a long time that I was attracted to girls and boys both, but back in Ledston I'd figured out quick that I wasn't nearly as interested in dating as most teenagers. Lane had talked about boys all the time. Myself, I just figured it would happen or not and there was no hurry. I'd wanted to kiss Lane, because I knew her so well, but she hadn't shared my attraction so we'd just stayed good friends.

There were only two other people besides her that I'd wanted to be with. One was a sailor's son in Port Cek. He'd been a couple years older than me, and his friends had called him Honey but I never learned his real name. He'd smiled at me when he thought I was a girl. He was all business with me once he figured out I was just a boy, and nothing ever happened between us. The Great Mother approves of anyone who wants to be with anyone, but he clearly hadn't wanted to be with me.

The other was a girl who had passed through our stables and stayed a week last fall. Her name was Kenosi. Her mother was a merchant from the Kingdom of Oxley. She told me stories about half the world while we ate pears under my favorite tree, and she kissed me, then she told me to forget about her. Honestly, it had sort of worked. I'd mostly forgotten about her. Sometimes I thought that my crush on her had just been jealousy of her life—she was a girl and she was seeing the world.

I tried extra hard not to watch Araneigh when she swam. I didn't succeed. I wanted to be with her. Or maybe I wanted to look like her. Maybe both.

She caught my eye as I sat on the bank, and she smiled, and my heart lifted in my chest for a moment, like I was falling. She looked away and I was myself again. I'd never felt that way before. I wasn't sure I liked it.

When Hex took off her dress, instead of an undershirt, she wore a bandage that bound her chest down. I could do that. I had no breasts to bind, but if I wore bandages like that, then people would assume I had breasts and just didn't want them showing or getting in the way. It didn't solve the problem of the bulge between my legs, but it was a start.

"Want another chance to bring back dinner?" Lament asked me while I was watching the witches and thinking.

"I don't know that I'll do any better this time," I said.

"We're not going to hunt anything," Lament said. "Just going to buy it."

"Oh," I said. "Sure. Why me?"

“Because you can pass for a boy, almost. No offense.”

“None taken.” My thoughts on the matter were far too complicated to be described as simply having taken offense.

“Just wear your hair different, in a topknot, maybe. That’s what boys are wearing right now?”

“Yup,” I said. I’d worn a topknot every day for years, while working the fields, only taking it down at home. As Lament watched, I tied my hair up, trying my hardest to make it look like I didn’t know what I was doing.

“Great,” Dam Lament said.

“Who are you going to be, then? My mother?”

She laughed. “I was hoping to be your older sister, but I guess, yeah, I probably look more like your mother.”

She went to a nearby pine tree and picked at the air near it as if she were picking fruit in an orchard. Once she had enough of the nothing she was collecting, she rolled it between her hands and smeared at her face. When her hands came away, she was the picture of unscarred beauty.

“There,” she said. “That’ll do until dawn.”

“You look amazing,” I said. That was the sort of magic I was going to need. “Why don’t you …” I cut myself short.

“Why don’t I do it all the time, disguise the wounds while they’re healing?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Then I realized it was a stupid question.”

“What’s the answer?”

“You don’t do it all the time because you have no shame in your wounds?”

“And no pride in a countenance unmarred by the weight of my actions, yes.”

I emptied my basket of clothes and Dam Lament led us away from camp. Not ten paces away, I turned and saw no sign of the coven. More illusion. I wanted that power as badly as I’d ever wanted anything.

Dam Lament walked without the crutch, once again sipping her potion for strength. We entered town on the main road, but no guard hailed us and no bell tolled our coming. A young man and his mother—or maybe older sister—drew no undue attention at all.

Even as the market was winding down for the evening—something that never happens at Port Cek—plenty of stalls were still open. We passed through the butcher’s row without stopping and made our way to the stall that sold the bounty of The Gate’s communal fields. Dam Lament talked quietly with the man behind the counter. She paid his asking price without haggling and hefted a sack into the basket on my back. The smell of oats was familiar, comforting. Another sack, barley. A third one,

radishes or maybe turnips by the smell, and then I had near all the weight I could carry.

Next we went to a florist. Once again, Dam Lament spoke quietly with the vendor—this time a teenager. He nodded at something she said, and when she offered him coin, he refused. We left the stall with lavender and craneflower and woundwort.

"What did you tell him?" I asked as we walked away.

"I told him we were witches, you and I. He said his mother was friend to the witches, and she'd have his hide if he charged me even a single coin."

"What did you tell the man selling produce?" I asked.

"I told him the same."

"And he refused to let you haggle him down?"

"No, that was my choice. I didn't try to haggle."

"He clearly overcharged you, though."

"I had some coins. Now I have some turnips. We're both quite happy with the exchange."

The three tax knights rode through the crowd then, stately and calm. I doubted that anyone gave them free flowers. I doubted even more that they refused to haggle.

The crowd grew still and nervous as they passed. People were wary of witches as well, but it was a different sort of worry. But fortunately, the tax knights didn't recognize us, and they went on their way.

"One more stop, if you're up for it. It could be dangerous."

"I have a choice?"

"By the Great …" Dam Lament stopped walking, closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. "Yes. You're a whelp, and you're your own person. Those two things are in conflict sometimes, but a witch is in charge of herself at the end of it. I'll see you to the edge of town and point you back to camp, or you can come with me on one more errand, one more place we try to visit each time we're in town."

"I'll go with you," I said. Curiosity far overpowered any thought of fear. "What are we getting?"

"Information."

With the sun nearly set, the shadows darkened and a chill set in. I pulled the hood of my cloak tight about me. The Gate was nestled between two towering cliffs, though the market and much of the newer settlement spilled out into the valley beyond. We walked toward one of the cliffs and the buildings became older and more ornate and fewer people were in the streets. Finally, we reached a towering portcullis set into the side of the mountain. An entrance to the hall of whatever giant had built this place, so many millennia ago.

A woman in a red linen dress sat next to the door reading a book. Lament whispered in her ear. The woman nodded and the portcullis rose, well-oiled and silent.

Darkness lay beyond.

I was giddy with excitement.

The giant's cellar was as big as I imagined the great hall of some ancient king's would have been. The arches above us and the walls to any side disappeared into gloom. In the center of all that open space, ten people sat on ten stools arranged in a circle.

An argument stopped at our approach. Lament held one hand out at her side, a clear white flame rising from her palm so as to give light. We'd exclusively used lanterns to see at night before, so I assumed the flame was as much a display of power as it was to light our way.

"So the Order of the Vine sees fit to meddle in the affairs of mortals," said a man with white and wrinkled skin.

"Witches are mortal, I promise," another man said. That man was paler still and had hair so black it blended in with the background. "I can show you."

"We're not here to meddle," Dam Lament said. She dropped her hand and the flame went out, leaving only the light of a distant brazier. "We're here to learn."

"Always outside of everything," the first man said. "We offer the Order of the Vine a standing invitation to our hall, and our confidence, but you only ever come for information. Never to help."

"In any fight with two sides, don't trust either one," Lament said. "Basic tenet of survival."

"Then why would we tell you anything?" the man said.

"You're Baron Keikan's first man, I presume?" Lament asked.

The man sat up straight.

"I am Hal Edmalton of The Gate." It took me a moment to place his title. I was in the highlands now, and Hal was a highland title, one we'd gotten rid of in the lowlands with collectivization. The man we were talking to was in charge of the entire town, and there he was, skulking around in the darkness. There I was, skulking with him. Rubbing elbows with power.

"I assume the Baron can't be seen … doing what, conspiring in an empty wine cellar with a handful of two- and three-bit merchants and mercenaries?" Lament asked.

"We're not conspiring," the second man said. "Just comparing notes."

"Compare notes with me, then," Lament said. "I have a feeling you need all the friends you can get."

"How can I trust you'll keep our confidence?" Edmalton asked.

“If I kill them, they’ll keep our confidence,” the pale man said.

“Stop trying to kill everyone, Dulbin,” Hal Edmalton said.

“I’m a soldier, it’s what I do.”

“That’s a terrible excuse,” I said. The room somehow got even quieter, and I could barely stop myself from slapping my hand over my mouth, in shock at myself for having spoken up.

Dulbin looked me over, angry for a moment, then dropped it.

“I suppose the boy’s right,” he said. “Girl,” he corrected. “My apologies. Just with your hair up like that …”

Dam Lament put her hand on my shoulder. I wasn’t sure if the gesture was meant to reassure me, congratulate me, or warn me to keep my mouth shut. I decided it meant all three.

“Alright,” Edmalton said. “Duchess Helte is making a play for the kingdom. Reunite, conquer, whatever word you want to use. She’s not raised an army, not yet. Hasn’t needed to. It’s all diplomacy and blackmail and spies so far.”

“Why did Keikan swear fealty to her?”

“Because he didn’t want to die, and he didn’t want his people to die.”

“Why are you conspiring … why are you in a cellar comparing notes?”

“The same reason.”

“Thank you,” Lament said. “That’s all we needed to know.”

“Dams,” Edmalton said, as we turned to leave.

“Yes?”

“You can’t just learn and observe forever. The troubled times aren’t coming, they’re already here. You don’t throw your lot in with anyone, you’ll face those times alone.”

“No meat?” I asked when we started across the fields and toward the forest.

“We walk out of a room full of treasonous conspiracy, and you’re asking about the groceries?”

“I don’t understand too much of that,” I said. “But I’m hungry. I’m surprised we didn’t buy any meat.”

“Now you want meat?”

“I just …”

“You didn’t want to kill it.”

“Maybe.”

We moved through rows of wheat, avoiding the road. The stars were bright and beautiful above us.

“Lesson number two. A witch’s body must be attuned to ley to access ley. Certain foods block our access to magic. It’s different for every person. It’s different season to season, year to year. It takes a while to get the hang of it. But there are a few things that have consistent effects. The

flesh of animals raised for slaughter will always impede magic, because magic is based on free movement."

"So only hunted meat?"

"Yes."

"So I'm going to have to learn to hunt or stop eating meat?"

"Those are both perfectly good options, but as long as people think you're pulling your weight, no one is going to begrudge you eating the food we share."

There were so many strange rules of witchcraft, and it was hard not to chalk it all up to superstition. I'd seen magic though, real magic. If learning magic meant following a bunch of nonsense rules, I could handle that.

I shifted the basket across my back and continued walking. No one was going to accuse me of not pulling my weight. Not if I could help it.

SIX

At noon the next day, we came upon the other two covens that comprised our covenant. They camped deep in the heart of the forest, where underbrush had given up trying to grow and the canopy perched a hundred feet above our heads. I had stared upward for a lot of the walk. I'd been told highland forests of fir and pine could reach heights like we never saw in the lowlands. It was one thing to hear about it, and quite another to see it with my own eyes.

Almost fifty wooden poles, carved into spikes and set at an angle facing outward, formed a loose palisade around the camp's perimeter. Charms and bones hung from most, and many were inscribed with runes I still couldn't read.

Hex pointed them out to Araneigh. "Those are to defend against calvary charges," she said.

We walked between two of the poles, and I shuddered imagining horses impaled against them. Horses are wonderful animals, wonderful friends. It had been bad enough to send three to their deaths to feed the helgirden, but to imagine them killed in battle was terrible.

I'd never seen so much black clothing in one place as the thirty or so witches of our covenant wore. It was fashionable for grown women with access to money to wear black, but usually offset by something bright—a sash, stockings, or even a cloak. Witches seemed to wear hoods and all black as a uniform, the same as knights wore tabards and armor.

The camp was a circle of tents. Its center was a single open field, with nine iron braziers forming a triangle within. Some of the tents were linen or wool as you might expect, but others seemed to be woven from vine and bark—perhaps by hand, perhaps by magic. Black pennants flew from the center post of most tents.

At the east of the circle stood a single simple cabin with a sharply sloped roof that had been built up against the root ball of a dead leviathan tree that, even on its side, still stood three times my height.

“Dam Willow lives in that cabin, much of the year,” Rose told us, ever the teacher. “She’s a solitary practitioner. Not more than half of all witches travel in covens; many practice alone. Some in villages, some in the wild. Most solo practitioners still make it to Endsmeet, and most let covens and covenants camp at their doorstep.”

I nodded.

“So we’ll be here a while?” Araneigh asked. She, too, kept looking up at the trees above us, and she never stopped smiling at them.

“Not more than two days, maybe three,” Rose said. “The other covens were waiting for us. Ley won’t settle down in one place until the earth is cold, so we’ve got to keep moving.”

She led the three of us through the small camp, past smells both vile and divine coming out of cauldrons. We walked past three women deep in trance, past another six singing some strange song, past women gossiping and women relaxing and women grooming one another and women arguing. In all my life, I’d never been surrounded so completely by women. Aside from me, there wasn’t a boy or a man in sight. No one took notice of me beyond a cursory glance, though. I hoped I could learn the magic of disguise sooner than later.

Dam Fia was there, stirring a cauldron and chanting in some unknown tongue. She looked up and smiled as we passed. She must have succeeded in dismissing the helgirden.

At the northernmost position in the circle, we came to a small pavilion of a tent, its sides made of that curious vine cloth. The entrance flap was staked open, but the inside was too dark to see.

“Here’s where you’ll bunk, with the other whelps,” Rose said. “We’ll eat dinner by the fire tonight; you’re free until then. You’ll want to sleep tonight, though. Training starts tomorrow.”

“Will you be teaching us, Rose?” Araneigh asked.

“No,” she said. “I wouldn’t enjoy pushing you as hard as you’re about to be pushed. Now get inside and meet your sisters. Whatever disagreements you have, settle them yourselves.”

Hex had a look of grim determination on her face, like a warrior about to head into battle. Araneigh seemed excited to meet other girls. Me, I’d been so overwhelmed with worry and wonder for days that I felt like I could take anything in stride.

“Training isn’t all bad,” Rose said, a sad smile across her face. “And it will certainly be worth it.” With that, she left.

“Yeah, it’ll definitely be worth it to learn to be a witch and get hunted down by knights,” Hex said. Araneigh jabbed her in the side with an elbow.

The darkness of the tent loomed in front of us. I took a breath and

walked in.

The tent seemed smaller on the inside than the outside. Cots lined the walls. Three girls were inside.

The biggest girl was brushing the smallest girl's hair. The third paced near the back wall, lost in thought, clutching a rag doll harpy to her chest, dried blood in lines down her face from a fresh cut on her brow.

The largest girl, with skin medium-dark like mine and hair darker and longer than my own, waved hello.

I put my basket down near one of the cots that seemed empty.

"That one's mine," the pacing girl said. "No one sleeps in my bed but me."

"Daidi gets bad dreams if she doesn't sleep in the same place two nights in a row," the larger girl said.

"I do not!" the pacing girl, Daidi, said.

Araneigh introduced herself, then I did.

"I'm Haim," the larger girl said.

"Henomi," the small girl on the floor whispered. I barely heard her.

Hex said nothing during the whole exchange. She and I had never talked about what happened that night at Araneigh's house; we'd barely talked at all. For the first time, I started to worry about her.

"How long have you been here?" Araneigh asked. "What's the routine?"

"About a week," Haim said, braiding hair as she talked. "Dam Ghin wakes us up before sunrise. We practice fighting until the sun's too hot, then we're done for the day. Afternoons we can kind of do whatever we want. Hang out here, wander around, be useful, bug the witches for one-on-one instruction, whatever."

"Why's everyone just sitting around, then?" Hex asked.

"Today's lesson was rough," the small girl, Henomi, answered from behind bloody teeth. Someone had bashed her in the mouth. How hard were the witches going to push us?

"I'm sorry," Araneigh said, setting her basket down on the closest empty bed.

"It happens," Henomi said, once again talking softly.

"What needs doing?" I asked. "Around camp or whatever?"

"What needs doing?" Hex said, raising her voice to imitate and mock me. "I'm such a good witch."

Only Daidi laughed. Her laugh was shrill and harsh, a kind of perfect witch's laugh. Her laughter shouldn't have gotten to me. Boys at home had bullied me plenty, and I'd eventually reached the point where it didn't get under my skin. But I had walked endless miles for days and home was far behind me. I was trying desperately to make it as a witch. I

was trying desperately to live as a girl—something I might never be able to do. Getting laughed at was hard to take.

Thankfully, Haim ignored Hex completely. She answered my question without looking up from her fingers full of hair. “Firewood to chop, water to carry, dinner to cook, that kind of thing. I’ve been helping sharpen weapons mostly, because I got sick of people assuming I’d be good for digging holes and carrying things. Today I’m just gonna braid hair. Any of you want yours done next?”

“Me,” Araneigh said.

“I can braid too,” Hex said.

“Great, two stations at once,” Haim said, patting the space next to her on the cot. Hex sat down, and Araneigh sat down in front of her. Haim passed Hex the hairbrush.

If Hex hadn’t been there, I would have stayed. I wanted to stay. But I couldn’t fit in, I couldn’t make friends. Not with her there.

“I like cooking,” I said, starting out the door. I’d just follow my nose to find wherever it was that the witches did their cooking.

“See you at dinner,” Araneigh said. I turned back to look at her. She smiled. Hex stared at me with eyes as cold as those blighted trees.

It turns out that in a witch’s camp, you can’t follow your nose to anything. Everywhere I looked—or smelled—there was another cauldron brewing. I walked the full circle without finding a kitchen tent. Eventually, Dam Fia found me wandering.

“Lorel, right?” she asked.

I nodded. I was impressed she remembered my name. “How did the rest of it go, you know, in that forest?”

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” she said. “It went as well as it could. I was able to dismiss them, and in gratitude, they accepted eating only horse. Thank you for your help.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I said.

“You took on the same risk as everyone else. Maybe more so, since you don’t yet have magic to protect yourself. Anything a coven does, everyone in the coven has done.”

“Is that why you travel alone?” I asked.

Dam Fia laughed. “Sure, I suppose so. There’s not some great tragic story behind it, though. I just work with particularly dangerous magic and don’t like putting my friends in harm’s way.” She got lost in thought for a moment, as if she might say more on the topic, but then changed the subject. “Now, you’re clearly wandering around lost. Where are you trying to go?”

“The kitchen,” I said. “I figure I could help cook. It’s what I’m good at.”

She smiled, then pointed the way.

I forgave myself for not finding it sooner, because it was outside the palisade wall, set back near a natural sandy beach on a large creek. Six black cauldrons sat atop six cook fires, and a large earthen oven was nestled between two massive fir trees. Only the forest itself served as the kitchen's roof. If anyone could predict the weather, it was witches, so I assumed it wasn't going to rain.

As I got closer, I realized the wooden spoons in the cauldrons were stirring themselves, as though by some invisible hand. I didn't see anyone around.

"Hello?" I called as I walked up.

Two figures in black walked up from the creek, each holding two gourds of water. The first was ancient, a crone I didn't recognize, bent in half and wheezing for breath. The second was half her age but still with graying hair and crow's feet at her eyes. She was pale and gaunt.

"Come to help or to get in the way?" the ancient witch asked as the pair poured the water into a cauldron.

"A little of both?"

The younger witch cackled, and the crone nudged her silent.

"I thought I'd come help stir the soup, but it looks like you've got that taken care of."

"There's more than enough ley in my grove to stir a cauldron," the crone answered, her voice dripping with sweetness. Her pupils were horizontal slits, like those of a goat. "What's your name, child?"

"Lorel," I answered. "You must be Dam Willow, if this is your grove." I thought about thanking her for letting us camp in her forest, but there was something about her that set me on edge. Her eyes were probing me, like Lord Eddercop's had. Her voice was kind, like Dam Sorrel's or Rose's, but it was an unnerving kindness that caused the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up. I didn't want to stay in conversation with her long.

Why were her eyes like those of a goat?

"Such a smart girl," she said, then gestured at the other witch. "This is Dam Heavens. She doesn't talk much and you shouldn't expect her to."

I nodded, and they put me to work. I spent much of the afternoon grinding oat flour, but once they found out I could bake, they set me in charge of the bread. I'd never made more than a few loaves in a day, so I burned more than my share and messed up the leaven in an entire batch so it wound up a bit chewy, but overall I was proud of my results.

Dam Willow was a bit reserved, in a way I was starting to consider characteristic of witches in general, like there were great mysteries she knew about that she didn't have the chance to explain. But she talked more than probably any other witch I'd met thus far, so I asked her questions.

“How come there are no children?” I asked. “There are so many women here, but no children.”

“Children are tasty,” Dam Heavens said, then cackled.

“We are for more than breeding,” Dam Willow told me, glaring at Heavens. “Very few witches let themselves become pregnant. There’s plenty of magic that can keep that from happening. Some witches do keep and raise their own children, but it’s rare. When a witch does have a child, it is often raised by its other parent or parents or close friends. Most girls, though, find their way back to the Order.”

“Like Araneigh?” I asked. That would explain why Araneigh was promised to the witches, and how she’d come to live with her ancient and strange father.

“Is that the Eddercop girl?” Dam Willow asked. “Yes, she was witch-born. You’re observant.”

I flushed with pride.

“Lord Eddercop isn’t the father though, not in the usual way,” Dam Willow said.

“Who are her parents, then?” I asked.

“It’s not my right to tell you.”

Curiosity ate away at me, but I decided not to pry further. It probably wouldn’t have done any good, but also, Dam Willow was right. That wasn’t my business. I didn’t know if even Araneigh knew.

I spent another half an hour hulling and chopping nuts, listening to Willow’s one-sided gossip to Heavens. She talked about the forest, and she talked about old witches I’d never heard of, and she talked about strands of ley as though they were people—which had gone where, which had mingled with which others, which had faded into nothing.

Dam Heavens spiced the food, pulling vials and jars of herbs and powders from the many pockets of her cloak. Some were familiar—rosemary, poppy, mint—while others were completely unknown to me.

A covenant eats at gloaming, I learned, which is what witches called twilight. There was some strange rule about attuning the body to ley when so many witches are in one place. The three of us rushed to make sure the meal was ready by the time the sun disappeared.

When the sun was low and the evening chill had set in, I carried basket after basket of bread to the central clearing in camp. A bonfire’s worth of wood sat ready to be lit, and stumps were scattered around as seats.

On my final trip, Dam Willow and I carried a cauldron of soup between us on a thick branch. By then, the covenant was gathered. Crones and some of the infirm sat on the stumps, and the rest of the witches sat on the ground. The three covens each sat apart. Ours was the smallest by far, even though Dam Fia had joined us for dinner; each of the others had at

least a dozen witches. Dam Lament was there without her crutch.

Most everyone held lanterns or candles, though a few women held white flame in their hands. All were silent figures in black. The sun was gone; only dusk remained. Another moment of simple beauty. A frightening beauty—I could scarcely imagine the power of those witches together—but a beauty nonetheless. A beauty I would get to be part of.

The whelps sat together, off to the side. I wasn't excited about rejoining them because of Hex, but I trudged over regardless. We broke bread, dipped it into the soup, and ate in silence.

The whelps from the other covens gulped down their food ferociously. I chalked it up to the hard morning practice which had left two of them bloody.

When the last glimmer of dusk disappeared, a handbell tolled, and everyone put down their food. Apparently they really meant it about eating dinner only in gloaming. I'd eaten enough, but not as much as I'd wanted.

With the meal over, conversation erupted as all the witches and whelps said all the things one normally would say during a meal. Araneigh told me excitedly that Dam Lament had been able to get healed because of the ley pooled around the camp. Dam Willow came over to compliment me on the bread and to tell the rest of the whelps I'd made it from scratch, then hobbled away.

Hex looked like she was going to say something rude, to accuse me of kissing up to the witches, but everyone else told me how great the food was, so she said nothing. Maybe it was unkind of me to assume, maybe she hadn't planned on doing that. Still, I was on edge around her.

Dam Willow had gone to sit with the witches of my coven. That made sense—she didn't have a coven of her own. Neither did Dam Fia. The pair sat and talked quietly and conspiratorially with the rest of our coven. At some point, all seven of them left the grove entirely. When they returned, Rose had her birdcage with her.

After some time, once most of the conversations had petered out, four witches—one from each coven plus Dam Willow, our host—stood next to the stacked firewood and everyone grew silent.

Dam Alectoria spoke. "Every day we survive is a night we chance to live," she said. She really had a knack for public speaking. Even without magic, her voice carried through the night.

"The night is ours and we are of it," replied the other three, and much of the crowd.

With that, Dam Alectoria gestured at the fire and it sprang into being, fifteen feet high in its first moment, casting sparks to the very highest boughs of the forest. Heat and light poured out.

The crones circled the fire, two walking sunwise, the others counter, singing an atonal witch song. Most of the whelps around me were excited, but Hex looked afraid. Daidi reached over and held Hex's hand.

In an instant, we were all in the red world. There were no trees, there was no fire. There were only witches and sky. Someone was singing that red song, the fox song, witch song, but I couldn't see who.

"A few of us have been studying this blight, what the dryad has called the colddead," Dam Alectoria said. Her voice wasn't raised anymore. She spoke as though it were just her and me at a table, but of course she was talking to everyone. "Here's what we've found."

Dam Sorrel stood up and spoke next. "A lot of us know the basic seed of the colddead blight. When you draw ley, you can overdraw it. Overdrawing ley strips life itself away—usually from the witch, but a few of us have figured out how to divert that death to nearby plants, animals, or other people. It's not a sustainable practice.

"That's the basic principle of colddead, but none of us had ever imagined blight on the scale of an entire forest. No caster could hold enough power in their body to even make use of it. That's what we had assumed."

"Then we found this," Dam Alectoria said. Rose handed her the cage and the older witch took off its cloth covering. Somehow, in the witchlight, I could see its contents close up even though I was far away. By concentrating, I could see anything and anyone close up if I wanted to, from any angle. It was dizzying, so I focused my attention back on the cage and the strange plant within. Inside the ornate golden cage was a sapling, no more than a foot high, with leaves that shone every color of the rainbow, bright enough to break through the red wash of the witchlight. The sapling grew from a skull. A human skull. Maybe a child's. I turned away. It was too terrible to consider.

"This tree holds ley like a gourd holds water," Dam Alectoria said. "We found it in this cage in a colddead forest while chasing blighters. None of us in our coven knew what to make of it. Dam Willow had some ideas, however."

"I remember the Order of the Wand," Dam Willow said, her voice sugar-sweet as she lifted the cage and gazed at its contents.

I looked over at the other whelps. If Dam Willow remembered the Order of the Wand, she was far, far older than any human—even a witch—had any right to be. Henomi was crying softly, her head resting on Haim's shoulder.

"That Order looked at ley like they looked at books. They studied it, probed at it," Dam Willow said. "They knew how to store ley, a little ley, in their wands. They did not overdraw."

“The forests have been blighted by a magician or magicians overdrawing ley to store in cages like this one,” Dam Sorrel said. “We think they plant a seed inside a skull within these golden bars, then funnel power into it until it sprouts. None of us have tried to replicate it, it’s all speculation. Sunlight seems to drain the leyplant, so we’ve kept it under cloth. But we know this cage contains an immense amount of power, though none of us have tried to draw from it. The blighters are gathering power, at the expense of life and ley.”

“To what end?” someone asked.

Dam Alectoria shook her head. “I don’t know.” She draped the cloth back over the beautiful ley tree and the world was completely red again.

“Whose skull is it?” someone else asked.

“We don’t know. Best guess, it’s someone who died within the last year. But maybe someone killed for this purpose.”

It hit me in the gut. Whoever had built this had murdered a forest. Whoever had built this had murdered a child.

“If this is just a different method of working with magic, then we must accept it,” a voice called out. What a terrible thing to say. I concentrated on the voice and saw who it was, as if I were next to her: Dam Heavens, the quiet witch I’d cooked with all afternoon.

“Like Nethers we will accept it!” Dam Lament called out. “It’s imbalance and imbalance again. Colddead blight is an evil. Keeping ley captive, keeping it only for yourself, is an evil. Killing people to store ley in their skulls is evil.”

“They’re summoning monsters,” Dam Fia said. “Demons from the Nethers. Bringing them here by ritual, by inflicting pain, and leaving them to live in the blight.”

More people spoke. Dam Heavens didn’t voice her opinions again, but Dam Lament and Dam Fia argued powerfully against blight magic, the colddead magic. Destroying the earth was the last thing that most witches wanted to do. Only a few of those present defended the blighters’ magic, and not for long. The main discussion focused on how to treat the blighters, whoever they were. Some argued that if witches brought the blighters to light and to justice, the knights and the Duchess would stop harassing the Order of the Vine. Other witches argued that it was a bad idea to try to appease the nobility.

After a lengthy discussion, Dam Alectoria said, “It’s settled, then? We will deal with the blighters ourselves, without handing them over to any other justice.” Her job wasn’t to pronounce judgment, or to make a decision, but to bring together all the ideas of the entire covenant into a compromise that met the most needs. My dads had taught me this practice, which was common among the merchant sailors who’d

collectivized.

“It’s settled,” many voices agreed.

“For the forests, and the world, for the majesty of the sky and the earth, in the name of the Great Mother, we declare this vendetta,” Dam Alectoria intoned.

I couldn’t tell if the oath itself was magic. Around witches, it was hard to tell what was supernatural and what was mundane.

The song stopped, and we left that red light. The world returned to normal, lit only by fire. Soon, an apprentice I didn’t know escorted us whelps to bed.

Only once we were in the tent did I think through what it meant to sleep in the same room with all the girls. Daidi changed into nightclothes. A few of them slept naked under thick wool blankets. Haim, though, kept all her clothes on when she lay down for bed, only taking off her cloak. I had to figure something out for the long term, but that night I was happy to just follow Haim’s lead and lie down without changing.

In my cot, I clasped my hands over my chest, closed my eyes, and took hours to still my mind enough to fall asleep.

SEVEN

When a witch I didn't recognize came into the tent and cleared her throat, I sat bolt upright in bed. The sun wasn't even out yet.

I wasn't sure what I'd actually heard the night before and what I'd dreamed. There had been chanting and singing. Fox cries. All night, fox cries.

What does a covenant get up to at night, once its whelps are asleep?

"We will meet in the clearing today," the witch said, then turned and walked into the darkness outside.

I hadn't been able to see her face under her hood, and it was a bit like I'd dreamed her. The morning was cold, and I lingered a moment with a wool blanket around my shoulders before I got up, slipped on my boots and cloak, and followed the rest of the whelps into the morning.

We met by the ashes of the bonfire, the grove lit now by a triangle of braziers, three to a side. Each of the three sides glowed a different hue. One red, one blue, one purple. As I walked past, I realized each fire was cold, and each fire burned no fuel.

Our teacher, who'd woken us, paced with her hands clasped in front of her waist. When the wind crept through the trees and caught her loose robes, I saw she was skeletally thin. When she took down her hood, I gasped.

I'd seen her before. In my dreams.

The glass-faced witch was my teacher.

"Good morning to you," the teacher said. Her voice was unnervingly normal.

Why was her face like that?

"Good morning," we replied.

"There are three new faces in the firelight. Araneigh of the Vine. Hex of the Vine. Lorel of the Vine." She looked at me, specifically. "Lorel of the Vine, I knew your mother. Leona of the Lead. She was a good woman, a faithful friend of the Order."

I just nodded.

“My name is Dam Ghin. For those of you who are new, all things can be understood in threes. It’s better, for our work, to understand the world in threes instead of opposites, in triangles instead of squares. There are three seasons in the witch’s calendar, not four. Birth, life, and death. Spring, summer, and fall. Birth begins with the year’s end solstice and runs until Mother’s May, the first equinox. Life runs from Mother’s May to Geron’s Veil, the second equinox. Then death takes hold until the sun begins its return. This is one way of understanding. There are also ways of working with circles, in which there are no seasons, no days, only flux like the moon. But you can’t build a wall with circles. You can build a wall with triangles. We’ll start with triangles.”

She walked to the centermost purple brazier, and we followed along behind her.

“There are three basic ways of enacting your will upon the world. There is action, there are words, and there is magic. A witch worth her cloak is versed in all three. We will be teaching you all three. Because it is summer, the season of life, we will be studying action. In the season of life, ley runs fast and full. The same as a flooded river will sweep away the swimmer, the summer ley will drown the uninitiated. But in the warm air, our muscles work best, our bodies work best. Come the season of death, there will be words. Come the season of birth, there will be magic.”

Disappointment hit me like a physical blow inside my chest. I’d have to wait nine months to learn magic.

“This isn’t an absolute rule,” the teacher said. “Nature abhors most absolutes. So do witches. You will pick up things, and learn more about ley, before the year’s rebirth. But we take whelps at Mother’s May so we can teach them action and words before magic.”

So that morning, before the sun rose, we learned action. We learned to fight.

That day, our practice weapons were battle-axes with wooden heads but balanced with iron in the handles, and I learned why some of the whelps were bloody when we had met them the day before. I was assigned to practice with Haim while Hex was with Daidi. They had become friends already, and I didn’t like the way they looked at me, like coyotes circling prey, waiting for weakness.

We drilled strikes, parries, and dodges with wood until the sun rose, then we practiced throwing with steel. I was miserably bad at throwing axes. Haim hit the target every time, and Hex was nearly as good.

Once the sun was up, apprentices and witches came in and out of the glade to spar with one another. They more or less ignored us.

After throwing practice, we fought.

“Witches do not fight duels,” the teacher said as she passed the wooden axes back out. “We do not fight for sport, we do not fight to prove our point or defend our honor. We fight because action is one way to express our will upon the world. What are some situations in which we might wish to express our will through action?”

“To not get killed,” Haim said, holding the long-hafted axe comfortably at her side.

“Probably the number one reason, yes,” Dam Ghin said. “In which case, you will likely be fighting outnumbered. New whelps, any other ideas?”

“To stop someone from doing something we don’t approve of,” Araneigh said.

“Quite right,” the teacher said. “In which case, if at all possible, it will be us who outnumber or are prepared to overpower our opponents. Anyone else?”

She looked at Hex, who glared back at her. “To free oneself from captors,” she said.

“Of course,” the teacher agreed. “Though words and magic might do you better overall in that situation, action—including fighting—would likely play a part.”

I was struggling to think of an answer, but the teacher seemed satisfied with what everyone else had said.

“Now,” she said, “until the sun is at its peak, we’ll play games.”

They weren’t games like I’d played in Ledston. Some of them were vicious games, in which one person, unarmed, had to defend herself against two or four armed attackers. Each game continued until all of us watching agreed that, had the weapons been sharp and their wielders swinging full force, either the victim or all her attackers would be dead. Other times both sides were armed, or started in different situations, or with different numbers of people on each side.

There was never any time to think during the games. I’d hoped to rely on my intelligence, but everything happened too fast. I had a hard time not flinching away from the wooden axes, because though we struck one another as softly as we could, we struck one another a lot, and things were moving fast, and it hurt.

Frankly, I was terrified. I couldn’t see how I would get through the day without being seriously injured. Or worse, discovered. I didn’t know what would happen if anyone struck me between the legs or anyone came in close contact with my body.

Whenever I was in a game with Hex or Daidi, I was even more afraid. Hex knew it, and she played it to her advantage. I lost every time when she attacked me. Even one time when she was unarmed, she wrestled my

axe from me and swung it at my head, only slowing down at the last second to lightly tap me on the forehead.

Daidi didn't seem to hate me, not yet, but she had a fire inside her. She fought like she meant it, like she hated the world and was angry at everything and everyone.

Whenever anyone wrestled me to the ground, I called out that I was dead or I let them win with their weapons. I was terrified every time someone touched my thigh or my waist.

It was all too much for me. I was exhausted and hungry and using muscles I didn't ever use. I was afraid of the axes. I was afraid of everything. Hex was going to hurt me, and I wasn't going to learn magic.

The last game of the day was a fight between myself and both Haim and Henomi. They had the advantage and they pressed it, closing in on me. I blocked one axe by knocking Henomi's arm out of the way, then sidestepped the other as I brought my axe down.

I didn't do a good job of slowing the blow, because I'd been far too distracted trying to avoid their weapons. I hit Haim so hard her collarbone cracked, and she fell to the ground with a solid grunt.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and looked at me. I dropped my axe to the ground.

I learned something new to be afraid of. I learned to be afraid of hurting people. I learned to be afraid of my own strength.

"I'm so sorry," I said, for the fifth or twentieth time as the two of us left Dam Willow's cabin. The cabin had been everything I'd hoped for—built of triangles, with a steep-pitched roof and herbs and bones and strange art everywhere throughout. A mysterious trapdoor with a thick iron ring peeked out from the edge of a bearskin rug.

Most fascinating of all were the cloven-hoofed prints in the mud outside her door. She kept no livestock that I could see.

Dam Willow had set Haim's collarbone with magic and claimed it would be healed completely in less than a day. The red ley of healing ran thick over her lands in early summer, she told us.

Haim held one of her arms with the other and was clearly trying not to show her pain as we headed back to the whelps' pavilion. "It happens," she said.

"I just … I don't know," I said. "I'm so sorry."

"I broke Daidi's nose, about a week back, the second day I was here," Haim said. "With my elbow. She came at me from behind with a wooden knife, and I wasn't thinking, I just panicked and lashed out, and I broke her nose. I got angry at myself for that, but I got even angrier at Dam Ghin. I weigh twice what Daidi weighs, and it wasn't fair to make us fight."

“Yeah,” I said.

“No,” Haim said. “I was wrong. Fighting isn’t about fair. Daidi needed to learn not to rush a woman twice her size, and I needed to learn control. I still don’t know my own strength, and I’ve got to learn. You and I, we’re the largest whelps. We’ve both got to learn.”

I was so used to seeing myself as small, but she was right.

Later that afternoon, though I was sore and I was tired, I went to the kitchen to help. It was better, somehow, to be busy. Araneigh joined a hunting party, while Hex went off with Daidi into the forest alone to do who knows what and Henomi and Haim joined some women weaving baskets.

That night, we ate dinner with the entire covenant again and had another fire. This time, we didn’t go into witchlight, that red world of magic. Instead, storytellers told us myths, well-traveled witches told us about far-flung corners of the world, and musicians played flutes and pipes and sang. It was glorious. I was even more exhausted than I was during harvest at home, but the stories and the songs were enchanting.

At the very end of the night, after the songs and stories, Dam Alectoria stood in front of the fire. She raised her hands above her head and the crowd grew quiet. Her mottled teeth of pearl and silver and gold glistened in the firelight.

“There are five of us here tonight with the hunter’s mark on our cheek,” she said, tracing her crescent moon scar. “I got mine sixty years back. That was a bad year. A bad hunt, as Lord Eddercop would put it.”

She paced as she talked and occasionally gestured at the fire, making it dance.

“There was a drought along the eastern shore, and forest fire, and of course that was somehow our fault.”

“It always seems to be!” someone shouted.

“I heard a fishing village had need of a witch, someone to deal with a monster from the sea. I never made it there. Got taken by a couple of vigilantes. I used to travel alone, back then. Didn’t think I needed a coven.”

An owl called out in the distance.

“These vigilantes, maybe they weren’t always bad people. Maybe they’d just listened to bad people, I don’t know. They’d been woodsmen, before the fires took their homes. They got me while I was sleeping, put a rope around me. I screamed. They broke out my teeth, I think with an axe handle, but I couldn’t see. There wasn’t much ley that summer, not in the scar of that forest. They shoved me onto a cart, carved my cheek. They were taking me off to whoever had offered a bounty.”

Dam Alectoria stopped pacing. The fire behind her grew, subtly, till it

stood over her and framed her against the dark canopy of the forest, a slight woman with a commanding presence. She was as good an actor as I'd seen in any troupe in Port Cek.

"I screamed through my blood, and I screamed through bits and shards of teeth and bone. The horse paced along, nervous, dragging me in the cart behind while the vigilantes walked alongside. I screamed and I screamed until my throat was fire, I screamed until the birds gave up trying to fight me for space and grew quiet. I kept trying to find ley, to find any scrap of power, because I was going to die, and the thing was, I didn't want to die."

"What saved you?" someone asked.

"I used to think I didn't need a coven," Dam Alectoria said. "But I wasn't the only witch who was headed to the coast that summer. Dam Ilma, she heard me. She saved me. There was no ley, but she had a crossbow, and those two men died instead of me. We've traveled together ever since."

Dam Alectoria started to walk away from the fire, then stopped halfway to her seat and turned back to face the other witches.

"They were good men, I'm sure, in their minds. It doesn't matter what's in your heart. It doesn't matter your intentions. It matters what you do."

The next morning, when we were drilling, I was one of the best, but when it came time for the games—fighting with spears, axes, bows, swords, knives, fists, rocks, all sorts of weapons—I simply wasn't any good. I was too afraid of hurting people and as a result I moved too slowly, too carefully.

I couldn't prove it, but I think Hex hurt me on purpose twice that day. Once, she twisted my arm almost out of its socket and took too long to stop after I called for mercy. The other time, we were fighting one versus one and she pushed me down and swung a club into my ribs so hard I had to limp over to Dam Willow's and drink a foul potion that would help with the healing but didn't diminish the pain.

I figured Hex hated me because I came willing to the witches. But so had the rest of the whelps. It didn't make sense.

After practice, during lunch, Araneigh sat between us and kept trying to be friends with both of us. Haim and Henomi had realized that Hex was a bully and mostly ignored her.

After we ate, I disappeared into the woods alone for a while, following the creek upstream until I found a hidden beach where I bathed and washed my clothes. The river rock was smooth and comforting under my feet, and the birds in the trees were my only companions, and I was at peace.

That night, at the fire, Dam Sorrel announced that Rose was ready to

progress from apprentice to witch. Rose called up a thick white mist and walked into it. Every witch in camp followed her. The fog dissipated, and the witches were gone, off to do their ceremony in some hidden realm.

The only ones left behind were us whelps and the five apprentices from the other covens. Unsure of what to do, we cleaned up after dinner in silence, waiting for the witches to come back. They didn't, though. Not until the next morning.

On the third day, Dam Ghin didn't come into our pavilion. Dam Alectoria did, with the child's casket slung across one shoulder. "Alright, whelps," she said. We were slow to respond, still dozing under our blankets. To get our attention more fully, she set the child's casket down on the ground and said, "We're breaking camp. We're heading east, and we're going to bury my child."

→ EIGHT ←

Breaking down camp was half magic and half hard labor. The youngest of us, of course, provided most of the hard labor. We uprooted palisade stakes and leaned them upright against the fallen leviathan tree. We took down and rolled up the cloth tents, storing them in a row of chests alongside Dam Willow's cabin. The vine tents, including our own pavilion, we ripped down and left scattered on the ground.

Everyone was somber that morning, and it wasn't too long before we found out why: Dam Fia was missing. Several of the witches, including Dam Lament and Dam Willow, spent the morning scouting the woods. There were no tracks anywhere. It was like she'd never left camp, like she'd just disappeared. Most likely, everyone said, she'd flown off in search of some demons and hadn't come back—she usually traveled alone anyway. Everyone said that, but from the faces of some of the witches, I could see that not everyone believed it. They were worried.

Were there monsters in the woods?

Dam Fia worked with monsters all the time. They couldn't have gotten her, could they have?

While we worked, other witches walked the grounds, singing and scattering dust. Everywhere they went, black tendrils rose from the soil. Grass grew. Ferns grew. Under their hands, the earth repaired itself. Wildflowers blossomed where mud had taken over.

We ate a simple lunch of stewed beets and oats with wild greens and some leftover stock made from the deer we'd eaten the night before.

As we left, Dam Willow stood in her doorway waving. Her front yard was now a beautiful glade, untouched by the hands of humanity. She promised she would direct Dam Fia to follow us whenever she returned. She was confident, and her confidence was contagious.

We walked all that day. Between witches, apprentices, and whelps, there were nearly forty of us, and it was a livelier—and slower—journey than I'd grown used to. Dam Sorrel and Rose—Dam Rose now, I had to

remind myself—walked with us whelps most of the day. They were friendly, and kept smiles on their faces, but they also kept a close eye on the woods.

Mostly, we walked east through wooded foothills, though we cut north down a dry seasonal run for a few hours in the afternoon. The creek bed was so narrow we had to walk in single file. Henomi stared at the ground, picking up rocks smoothed by the passage of water and showing us the best ones. Daidi and Hex walked together just behind the rest of us, whispering and laughing.

Dam Lament and a few other witches came and went from the party, scouting ahead and—I guessed from snatches of overheard conversation—looking for signs of the missing witch.

"Where are we going, anyway?" Araneigh asked while we walked between oak trees.

"Some glade," Dam Rose said. "It's got some particular significance to Dam Alectoria. That's about all I know."

The sun set at our backs and we set up camp as the stars came out. Witches seemed to know all the best and most beautiful places to sleep. An abandoned hunter's house perched on a ledge of rock overlooking the valley. Its rotted wood walls were held together as much by flowering vines as they were by rusted nails. The eldest witches would sleep inside while the rest of us camped around it.

A massive lake filled more than half the valley below us, and the moon shone bright on its waters. Most of us whelps sat with our feet dangling over the cliff. Henomi sat a bit away from the edge.

"That's Lake Leur," Araneigh said. Then she pointed to the two closest mountains. "That's The Wanderer, that one is The Hermit. My father says they used to be titans. They were in love but kept forever apart by their natures. They met here, at Lake Leur, once every thousand years, until they decided to give up their lives so they could be together."

"That's sweet," Hex said.

It *was* sweet, though I didn't want to agree with Hex.

"What do you think happened to Dam Fia?" Henomi asked quietly.

"Bet she was the blighter," Hex said. "Took off once she heard about the vendetta."

"Why would you say something like that?" Araneigh asked, shocked.

"Where did we meet her?" Hex replied. "In the colddead. What was she doing? Hanging out with monsters. In the colddead."

"She was against the blighters, she said it herself," I said. "I think she went off to investigate."

"I bet she was gobbled up by monsters," Daidi said.

The argument petered out quickly. None of us liked thinking about

someone disappearing in the middle of the night.

We went to lie down soon after, exhausted from the march, but the witches stayed up.

"Witches don't sleep at all," Haim whispered. "Not like regular people do. If there's enough ley around, they can draw on it instead."

"I'd miss dreaming," Araneigh said.

"Me too," I said.

"I won't," Daidi said. "I won't at all."

In the morning, we woke early and walked down into the valley as the sun rose on our faces. It was the warmest day of the year so far.

Up close, the lake was as massive and blue as the sky. It was so big, the trees on its far side were tiny and hazy in the remnants of the morning's fog.

The beach was perfect black sand. A witch's beach, I decided. Many of the others began to strip off their robes and cloaks and dresses.

"We'll be here most of the day," Dam Rose said, looking at us whelps. "Dam Alectoria says she wants the burial to happen tonight, when the moon is at its peak. The grove where we'll do that is nearby, so … have fun."

All I wanted to do was strip off my dress and run into that water, let the cold wash over me. The weather was perfect. The company was perfect. Even Daidi and Hex held hands as they charged into the lake, and even some of the crones undressed to their underwear and walked in.

I couldn't.

I sat on a fallen log and watched everyone play. Araneigh sat down next to me.

"You're not going swimming?" she asked.

"No," I said.

"Don't like swimming?"

"Nope," I said. Then I remembered something Lane had told me once, when we were very little: never lie to your friends. You can hide stuff, but don't lie. "No, that's not true. I love swimming."

"You never change in front of anyone," Araneigh said.

My heart started racing.

"You don't like grappling, either, and you won't go swimming." She took a deep breath, and put her hand on my back. What did she know? "It's okay to hate your body, or be afraid of your body."

"It is?" I asked.

"Of course it is. I mean, we're women, but just barely. You're taller than the rest of us, and you still don't have hips, and it's like you're still a little girl but stretched out all tall."

"Thanks," I said. "I think."

“That didn’t come out like I meant it. There’s nothing wrong with your body. It’s just we’re changing a lot right now and it’s hard, and also I don’t know about you, but I didn’t grow up with a lot of friends, just me and my dad and some of the forest people or travelers who came by. I don’t know. I don’t like my body either, is what I’m trying to say, and that’s fine. And we don’t have to go swimming if we don’t want.”

“Thanks,” I said, but this time I meant it. I still felt like I was lying to her. I probably was. But I had to, to stay safe.

“Hate” wasn’t the right word for how I felt about my body. My body took me everywhere I wanted to go. It let me walk for weeks at a time. It let me fight and play. Maybe it was just the wrong body, like the wrong overall shape, or built with the wrong parts. Or maybe the parts were fine, and what was wrong was how people looked at me, how people treated me as a result of those parts. I wasn’t sure. I’d never fit in with the boys. It seemed like I was fitting in with the girls, but only because I hid myself away.

It was impossible to linger on those thoughts. Whenever I tried to focus on them, they disappeared, like how dreams escape your mind in the morning.

“I’ve always wanted to come to this lake,” Araneigh said. “Not to go swimming, though. For the woods. My father talked about titan’s toe fungus, a mushroom that only grows here. It’s supposed to be delicious.”

“Eww,” I said.

“I know, right? Totally disgusting name. It grows on bear poop. Want to help me find some?”

In spite of the name, that sounded better than watching everyone have fun without me. Before Hex met Daidi, it had been like Hex and I were competing for Araneigh’s attention. Now Hex had a new best friend, but I still didn’t know Araneigh any better.

“What’s the deal with your dad?” I asked as we hiked into the forest. “Is he a spider? That’s what his name means, isn’t it?”

“He’s a dryad.”

“What does that mean?”

“As he tells it, in the old days, the titans were slowing down and the giants were taking over. The giants built huge cities, huge castles, everywhere. They cut down the forests and caged the animals, and they made the world into their own.

“The very last titan, his name was Geron. He ruled the first kingdom. He hated what the giants had done, so he broke off each of his fingers and each of his toes. Each finger became a dryad, each toe became a great bear. The dryads were nymphs tasked with tending the forests, the great bears with protecting the mountains. There used to be ten dryads, each

one part human and part a different animal. Only three of them are still alive. Lord Eddercop is one of them."

"Aren't nymphs …" I started to ask.

"Girls? I asked him about that. He said he didn't feel like being a girl so he stopped being one."

"How?" I asked. I tried not to sound too excited.

"He says he's a shapeshifter."

That didn't do me much good.

"Do you think the whole titan thing is true?" I asked.

"No, not really. My dad tells me that story in his myth voice, like the one about the two mountains. I don't think the titans were real. I think they're stories we tell either to make some point or to fill the gaps in our knowledge so that the holes we can't fill don't gnaw at us like hunger. I don't know what came before the second kingdom."

"So what do you think is real? About your dad, I mean." The forest around us grew denser, and soon we could no longer hear our sisters at the lake.

"I've never seen my father transform into a spider, or a girl, or anything else, but I think he used to, when he was younger. He still makes silk, but it's woven from his hair and not from his abdomen. I think it's probably true that there were ten dryads, who might have been human magicians working some unknown magic or might have been creatures of some other kind, and now there are three. I know that the Order of the Vine gave me to my father when I was a baby for the sole purpose of raising me to be a witch. But he doesn't talk much. I got used to talking so much because I always felt like I had to fill up that space."

"You were raised specifically to be a witch?" I asked.

"You weren't?"

"Yes and no," I said. Maybe that counted as lying, I don't know.

"I fill up space by talking," Araneigh said, "but you mostly just ask questions. You don't talk about yourself. What's got you so reserved?"

"I'm reserved?" I asked.

"You didn't even notice it?"

"I guess not."

"Well, I mean, it's okay. I don't want to pry. I just want to get to know you. You're mysterious." She smiled.

It was hard to imagine me as the mysterious one in this company. But maybe she was right?

"Maybe … I'm so caught up observing the outside world that I'm not paying a lot of attention to the inside world," I said. "But … I don't know!"

"Well, I didn't mean to make you worry about it overmuch!"

It was something I'd have to think about. Later.

We found a creek running high with snowmelt and followed it upstream to a beautiful little waterfall, no taller than us. Araneigh cupped her hands and drank, then shivered in delight at its cold.

From above the falls, I heard an atonal voice. Witch song.

Araneigh started up the hill at once, but I took her by the hand, placing a finger over my lips. She gripped my hand back tightly for a second before she let go, and for that second I felt like I was floating. After she let go, I could still feel an echo of her touch on my skin.

I crawled up the side of the falls, with Araneigh following after me, then we took cover behind a downed log and peered over it. The trees on the other side were behemoths, a grove of firs as big around as small houses. Between two of the trees stood a woman wearing black, singing. Dam Heavens, the silent woman I had cooked with. She was part of Daidi's coven.

She had a hand on each tree. On the ground in front of her was a gilded cage with a human skull inside. A different cage, a different skull. The golden bars on this one were plain where the other had been ornate filigree. It was hard to see from where we were, but I was pretty sure there were still scraps of flesh on the bone.

"Is she …" Araneigh whispered.

Frost formed on the bark under her hands, glittering in the sunlight. As we watched, it spread. I could see that three of the ancient trees behind her had already been destroyed by blight.

Horror flooded over me, a horror like I'd never felt before. I'd seen terrible people in my life. I'd seen violence and anger and hate. This was unfathomably worse. This was evil.

I'd cooked with her. I'd learned from her.

She was the cause of the colddead. She was the cause of the bad hunt. And in front of our eyes, she was murdering a forest, just as she had, presumably, murdered whoever's skull was inside that cage.

Beside me, Araneigh's eyes were as wide as my own, her mouth hung slack the same as mine. She took a deep breath in through her nose and let it out through her mouth. She picked up a rock.

"To the titan's hell with this," Araneigh said.

I thought about trying to stop her, then realized I didn't want to. I grabbed a rock as well. My hands were clammy from fear and my muscles scarcely worked. She smiled, then mouthed a countdown from three to zero. Her smile worked on me. Calmed me. Not completely, but enough. We threw the stones, then ducked, grabbed more, and threw again.

It was stupid. We were no match for Dam Heavens, or any full-grown witch. I didn't care. I let determination take the place of fear in my heart.

The song stopped, and when I peeked out again, she was gone. The cage was gone.

I didn't know Dam Heavens, not really. I thought I had, but I hadn't. She'd spoken less than twenty words to me. Even after I'd seen it with my own eyes, it was hard to imagine she was a blighter.

"We have to tell someone," Araneigh said. "Dam Alectoria."

"They'll kill her," I said. "There's a vendetta."

"Yeah, probably," Araneigh said. "Though I guess now she'll probably run, since she knows she got caught."

They would kill her. In my mind, I knew it was fair. In my heart, though, I wasn't so sure. The Great Mother teaches us to unite our hearts and our minds, our bodies and our souls. That we ought never be at war with ourselves. The Great Mother taught that, but I didn't know how to do it.

"But … they'll kill her," I whispered it this time. I was nearly crying.

"Uh huh. Come on, let's get back to the lake."

Dam Alectoria lay on the black sand in her black underdress with the sun on her weathered face, her child's casket laid out next to her. She looked content. I didn't feel great about interrupting her.

Most of the rest of the witches were still in the water, though the apprentices had gathered nearby on the beach to build sandcastles. They were made as much from magic as from sand, as evidenced by the black pennants that flew from their tiny black towers.

"Dam Alectoria?" I asked.

"Yes?"

I told her about Dam Heavens. Araneigh insisted that if I was the one with second thoughts, it was up to me to tell her or not, so that I didn't feel like she was making decisions for me. I wasn't sure her logic was sound.

After I'd spoken, Dam Alectoria sat bolt upright, faster than I'd ever seen her move, and scanned everything around us. She nodded, content that we weren't in immediate danger, and lay back in the sand, a thoughtful look on her face.

"Well?" Araneigh asked. "Aren't you going to do anything?"

"We will."

"Like what?"

"I didn't suspect Dam Heavens," Dam Alectoria said. Her voice was heavy. "I should have. But we'll find her, tonight."

"Aren't we burying your son tonight?" I asked.

"The grove you mentioned was where I was going to rebury him. But I moved him the first time because of blight, and I won't put him in the ground beneath a dead forest."

“What will happen to Dam Heavens?” I asked.

“You’ll see.”

The whole covenant, minus Dam Heavens, who never reappeared, went together to see the blighted firs. The grove was more than half dead, and for a moment it was all I could do to hold back tears.

The forest had been beautiful once. Maybe it still was, but it was the beauty of a tomb. Frozen, dead trees stood in testament to what the forest had been.

“How long do they stay cold?” I asked Dam Alectoria.

“We don’t know yet,” she said. “Months, at least. Probably forever.”

The firs wouldn’t rot back into the earth, making new soil for new trees. A forest fire or even natural blight would leave the forest ready to regrow, but this, this wasn’t just dead trees, it was the extinction of a forest.

“Why do they do it?” I asked.

“Power,” she said.

“Power to do what?” I asked.

“The only reason anyone wants that much power,” Dam Alectoria answered. Her voice was tired, sad. “To gain more power still.”

There had to be more to it than that. It just didn’t make any sense.

There wasn’t much to see in the grove. After forlornly digging at the soil with the toe of her pointed boot, Dam Alectoria shouldered her casket, and most of us started back to the beach. Thirteen witches—including Dam Ilma, Dam Lament, and several witches from Dam Heavens’s own coven—went off in another direction to track Dam Heavens.

We walked mostly in silence, like the blight had stripped us of our words as surely as it had stripped us of any joy we’d found in the day. Everyone was silent except Hex.

“Isn’t that what witches do? Gather and wield power?” she asked. I couldn’t tell if she asked it to be biting or out of plain curiosity.

Dam Alectoria took a deep breath in, then exhaled. “Some magicians serve magic. Some, like the blighters, I presume, force magic to serve them. The Order of the Vine does neither. Magic is neither our master nor our servant. We let it flow, and we work with it to do what we feel needs done. Magic runs free, throughout the world, for anyone to use. Blighters put it under lock and key.”

Hex looked like she was going to say something in response, but Daidi caught her eye and shook her head a little.

We set up camp just within the tree line of the lake. We ate dinner out on the beach, sitting in a half circle around an unlit bonfire. The thin gruel of oats was particularly bland without any of Dam Heavens’s touch

at spicing.

None of the hunters had returned.

I wanted her caught, I realized. She'd destroyed the forest. She'd betrayed my trust. And someone's skull had been in that cage. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that it was Dam Fia's.

I didn't know if it was right or wrong, for me to want Dam Heavens dead.

Then I thought about what Dam Lament might tell me: there isn't right or wrong, only balance. Which sounded sort of like nonsense, on a couple levels. It seemed to me that people saying there's no such thing as right or wrong are probably looking for an excuse to do wrong.

As we finished our meal, a speck of black appeared in the sky, growing larger and larger until I could make it out as Dam Willow. Her arms were outstretched, her toes pointed down at the earth far below her, her cloak blew in the wind behind her. She landed, looked around, then hurried over to talk with Dam Alectoria. I couldn't make out their words, but Dam Willow was clearly agitated.

After dinner, we stayed on the beach, still gathered around the unlit bonfire. The dark crept in and only the dim light of a few lanterns pierced the night. Conversations were hushed. We were all waiting. Waiting for what?

A hunting horn blew in the distance.

Another answered, closer.

Fifteen minutes passed and Dam Ilma walked out of the woods and into the circle. A torch sparkled and guttered with pale magic fire above her head, lighting the beach as surely as the moon that sat low in the sky reflecting on the water. In her other hand, she held Dam Heavens's golden cage. A jeweled multicolored sapling had broken through the crown of the skull.

Ilma stood next to the unlit fire and looked around at the assembled witches. A few of the crones went to her, and they talked in low tones for a brief moment.

Dam Lament returned next, a boar spear in one hand and dragging the tail of a rope in the other. Dam Heavens hobbled in behind her at the other end of the rope, her ankles and hands tied, her mouth pinched shut.

Beside me, Araneigh gasped and pointed. I looked at Dam Heavens more closely. Her mouth was sewn shut with white thread.

"Spider's silk," she whispered to me. "My father's silk."

I shuddered. It was all too much. I missed my bed. I missed Lane. I missed my mother. I missed being curious about the world instead of terrified by it.

Araneigh squeezed my arm. Haim leaned against me, and Henomi

against her. Even Daidi and Hex held on to us all.

I wasn't alone. Despite everything else, I wasn't alone.

"We found this cage in Dam Heavens's possession," Dam Ilma said, holding the sapling cage aloft in the moonlight. She didn't have the stage presence—or the magically loud voice—of Dam Alectoria, but we were all riveted. Even the nightbirds seemed to hush so we could hear. "And she's confessed."

"If she's confessed," a witch from another coven said, "let's have it from her own lips and not have them sewn shut."

"You'll chance her doing magic, to hear it from her yourselves?" Ilma asked.

"We will," someone else called out. A murmur of agreement rippled through the crowd.

Dam Lament pulled out a knife. It flashed in the light as she slashed the silk.

"A hex on all of you!" Dam Heavens spat once her lips were free. "May your words fail you, your muscles fail you, your magic fail you when you need them most."

All the witches in the crowd spoke at once, in a single voice. "It will not be so!"

"You'll have me dead, I'm sure of it, and here's one thing I can say that you can't counterhex: You can't stop cage magic. You're fools to fight it. Your will is weak, and you will die, and the Order of the Vine will die."

"Silence her!" Dam Willow called, forlorn, from the crowd.

Again, the murmur of agreement. Lament went to Heavens and held her mouth shut. Ilma approached, drawing needle and silk from her pouch. Dam Heavens did not flinch, she did not struggle. I looked away.

Araneigh held me and I held Haim, and some of us or all of us were shaking.

"What did you do with her body?" someone cried out. Her voice cracked as she screamed. One of Dam Fia's friends. I'd been right. I hadn't wanted to be right.

"She wouldn't tell us," Dam Lament said.

Lament led Heavens to the unlit pyre—that was what it would be, tonight, it seemed—and Heavens stood atop it, defiant, her head held high.

"We condemn you," Dam Ilma said, her voice heavy, unhappy.

The twelve other hunters joined their voices with hers. "Dam Heavens of the Vine, we condemn you to die by fire."

A few people started crying then, including two of the hunters, who had known Dam Heavens well—or thought they had.

Ilma thrust her moonlight torch into the piled wood at Dam Heavens's

feet. The wood caught, but the flames were pale flames, the flames of the moon. The fire didn't gutter and spark, it danced slowly, ebbing and flowing as it enveloped the witch.

I started crying too. I didn't watch. My fathers would have tried to make me watch, to teach me about life, but I knew my mother wouldn't have. My mother had always been the wisest of my parents.

Araneigh stroked my hair, but she was distracted, watching the flames.

Birds kept singing and frogs kept croaking while I cried. It seemed monstrous that the world carried on while such a terrible thing was happening.

Eventually, Dam Heavens screamed. Only once, only briefly. It sounded like a fox in the night.

Two things came as sure as death into my mind just then. The first was that I had killed her. The same as I had, unthinking, broken Haim's shoulder by action, I had killed Dam Heavens through words. It was a horrible feeling, but not horrible because I was convinced I had committed some great evil. It was a horrible feeling like it's a horrible feeling to pry open the ribcage of a hunted deer. A visceral, nasty feeling, at once powerful and disgusting.

My second thought was the realization that witches burned people who betrayed them, and that I was lying to them, to all of them. I hadn't killed anyone, and I wasn't working blight magic. But still, I was lying to my coven and the others. If I was found out, I might not be going home. I might be atop that pyre, and I'd scream a lot longer and louder than Dam Heavens had.

"It's okay," Araneigh whispered to me, stroking my head. "It's okay."

It wasn't, though. And it wasn't going to be.

→ NINE ←

As us whelps made our way back to our bedrolls, Dam Lament stopped us. She was frightful, to be honest. I don't know why it hadn't ever occurred to me to be frightened of her. Her eyes were severe, the corners of her lips turned down. The glow of her lantern highlighted the newly healed wounds that had scarred her face.

She stepped into our path. *She knew.* She was the hunter, I was the prey.

"It's been a long day," she said. "It might be a longer night. There's a town, Set Porlock, an hour's walk from here. We've always been good to them, so they've always been good to us. I'm going to go there with a few of the younger witches. Partly we're going to listen to rumors. But mostly … to hear music and be around people and forget the pyre for as long as we can. You whelps, you're invited too."

She didn't know about me.

"I'll come," Haim said. That was enough to convince most of us to join.

"Sure," said Daidi, which was probably going to be enough for Hex.

"I'll just go to bed," I said.

"Aww, Lorel," Araneigh responded to me, "I think you and me need this as much as anyone."

What was I going to say? That I didn't want to go because I was terrified of all of them, because if they found out I was a boy they'd kill me too?

Araneigh put her hand on my waist, and my whole body tingled.

"Alright," I agreed.

"Good," Lament said. "Getting to know the people who don't hate us, that's as important an education as any."

With the moon overhead, a dozen of us made our way along a river to a road, then into a strangely raucous little town nestled against the base of a cliff, framed on both sides by waterfalls. Set Porlock. In the highlands, anything smaller than a city was called "Set."

As we approached the public house, firelight illuminated its cheap scraped-hide windows, and I heard music and laughter. The building had no sign out front. It wasn't marked or named. It didn't need to be. In Port Cek, all the public houses had names like the Mare & Gent, the Drunksman, the Stocks, or Grell's favorite pub, the Pie & Pauper. The names weren't written, just illustrated on signs over the doorway or inside the window. At home, though, the public house was just the public house. There weren't two of them in Ledston. I was sure this place too was just called the public house.

When we entered, we were met by rowdy cheers. The public house was almost entirely full of brigands. A few folks who looked to be farmers and the like were mixed in with the crowd, socializing after a hard day's work, but it certainly seemed like we'd found an entire town of outlaws.

They wore the impromptu uniform of brigands everywhere: a mismatch of roughly made leather clothes, stolen and defaced knightly garb, and scraps of armor placed almost decoratively around their bodies. The men and women who worked the roads—as I'd heard them describe themselves—bristled with knives and swords and axes, but they all seemed happy and generally not-murderous that evening.

My mother never thought any higher of brigands than she did of knights, and her low opinion of both had rubbed off on me. My dads were even more critical, since they likened brigands to pirates and had nothing nice to say about pirates. As my mom put it, knights rob people in the name of whatever noble rules the area, who sort of gives back by protecting the borders from invasion and by killing the worst of the brigands. Brigands rob people for themselves, and they sort of give back by maintaining some of the roads—the roads they patrol to demand tolls—and by killing the worst of the knights.

It wasn't quite as simple as that, even my mother sometimes admitted. Brigands actually spent more time fighting other brigands than they spent fighting knights, and knights spent more time with the formalities of court than they spent fighting anyone. Both could usually be called upon by peasants to dispense justice to murderers, thieves, and the occasional monster.

Brigands have always been better friends to witches than knights have been. There's always been a fine line between witch and outlaw.

In one corner, a man with long gray hair and a long gray mustache, a sort of skeleton in plate armor clearly stolen from someone twice his girth, played harp with a fire and passion. It was like he had three hands, or four, because his fingers moved so fast across the strings. Araneigh watched him enviously.

"If it isn't the Order of the Vine," the barkeep said. She was a tall

woman with light skin, and she was grinning ear to ear. “I heard you did a wonder on those tax knights causing a mess in The Gate.”

“It was barely us,” Dam Lament said, looking at her feet for half a second in modesty. “An Ilthurian did that work.”

“Espen?” the barkeep asked, cocking her head toward the back of the room. “He’s the one who told me it was you lot.”

He must have heard us talking about him, because he stood up from his table. He wasn’t in peasant’s garb anymore. He wore the tabard of the Ilthurian knights: a crimson hexagon on an earth-brown field. He was still handsome, and my cheeks went hot as I blushed to see him.

“I heard my name,” he shouted across the crowded room. He climbed up and walked across the top of his long table—carefully avoiding the mugs of his fellows—and hopped down to the flagstone near us.

“These witches say it was you who taught the Brotherhood of Helte’s Coin a lesson in manners,” the barkeep told him.

“Slander! I will take no such credit.” He winked, which was funny because I wasn’t sure who he was winking at.

“Ilthura Espen?” Dam Lament asked.

“I am he.”

“I am Dam Lament, of the Order of the Vine. I’d like to offer you my thanks, and the thanks of the Order.”

“I swore off accepting credit for my deeds a long time ago,” he said. “But I’ll let you buy me a drink. There isn’t one table in the house big enough for the lot of you, but some of you could keep me company at mine. Better to drink with a witch than a bandit, no offense to these bandits.”

“Eat sod,” a woman yelled from a nearby table, happy and drunk.

It ended up being the whelps of my coven and Lament who sat with him. The barkeep brought watered wine, bread heavy with honey, and fruit.

A local man sat at our table too. He was nearly as young as Dam Lament, yet he carried himself like a man at the end of a long life. He was quiet for a while as the rest of us talked, slouching and looking at the tabletop, very clearly drunk.

“You know why this town loves the Order of the Vine?” he asked quietly, during a break in the conversation.

“Why?” I asked.

“Children go missing here. Everywhere around this whole area. Some people blame the Order. Not me. Dam Willow, she’s one of you, she saved me.”

“Really?”

“I was ten years old, out checking my snares in the woods, when a cold

wind struck me from behind, and I turned, and there was the devil. In the flesh. The titan's devil. Head of a goat, eyes of fire. The beast that grew from Geron's left eye."

"Are you scaring those girls with ghost stories?" asked a brigand from the next table over.

"I'm telling the Mother's truth, is what I'm doing," he answered, then turned back to me. "Like I said, the devil himself. He opened his mouth, and cold came out, and I went down. Woke up ten days later in bed, Dam Willow fussing over me. She'd found me, she'd saved me. Devil took a lot out of me, he did, and I'm old before my time, but at least I'm alive at all. That's Dam Willow, that's the Order of the Vine. Children still go missing, but Dam Willow, she brings back more than half of us. Has since … since before my grandfather's time. So … thank you."

With that, he raised his glass, drained it, and said nothing else the rest of the night.

Even watered, the wine lightened my mood. Ilthura Espen told us stories, each one more obviously a lie than the last, and all of us were laughing. He brought light and mirth to an evening that had been so dark. Dam Lament was flirting with him, and it made me jealous, and I wasn't used to feeling jealous like that.

I'd almost forgot my worries until Ilthura Espen asked what brought us out to celebrate.

"Celebration isn't what I'd call it," Dam Lament said. "There's blight, and it's not just in the forest. It was creeping into our ranks. Tonight, we burned out that blight."

Espen nodded with exaggerated motions. He was drunk, and he had no wisdom to comfort Dam Lament.

If I'd stayed in Ledston, if I'd become a stablehand, there simply was no way I'd have spent a night at a table with an Ilthurian, talking about the evil spreading across the land and how to confront it. I was part of doing good in the world. I was living the life of a witch.

At the next table over, one of the witches I didn't know stood up suddenly and shouted, "Say that again, swine."

A giant of a man, a brigand who wore the skull of a boar as a necklace, laughed and, presumably, repeated himself. It clearly wasn't very nice, whatever he said, because the witch looked back at Lament and some of the other sisters, saw them nod, then raised her hands above her head.

"Oh, is the little witch going to get angry?" The public house had grown so quiet we all heard his words that time. Even the harpist was still. "What are you going to do, make my crops a little fuzzy? Make my great-great-grandchild be born with nine toes?"

All of his fellows crept away from him like he carried the plague.

“May your outsides show your insides,” the witch whispered. She clapped her hands above her head and thunder shook the sky outside. Rain fell in a fury on the roof and against the windows. The brigand screamed, then he squealed, and a moment later, he was a boar, trapped in his old clothes and thrashing in anger. Another brigand reached down and carefully set him free, and the boar charged out of the public house, into the sudden storm.

Everything but the rain was quiet for a moment.

A few of the other witches were standing, as were some of the brigands. Hands hovered near weapons.

“Your friend will be fine as soon as the sun hits him,” the witch said. She waved her hands and the rain stopped.

A few of the brigands laughed, then raised their mugs in a silent toast. The outlaw with the harp resumed playing, and everything was back to how it should be.

I was going to be a witch. Whatever it took, however scared I was, I would become a witch. I was going to have power like that. Power enough to keep myself safe. Power enough to make sure people left me alone.

We stayed at the public house late, well past the middle of the night. I was careful not to drink too much, always adding more water to my wine rather than the other way around, and I tried to stay alert. I ate plenty of sweet bread and let the night pass me by, and that was what I needed.

Dam Lament drank ale freely, and I thought it might be a good moment to ask her some of the questions I’d been building up.

“Why is Dam Ghin’s skin like glass?” I asked. “And Dam Willow’s eyes like a goat’s?”

“Why do you think?” Dam Lament said. I should have known that not even in her cups would a witch give me a straight answer to a question.

“Either they were born like that, and people with deformities are more likely than other people to end up witches, or there’s something about being a witch that is more likely to leave you deformed.”

“You’re on the right track,” Lament said, “but don’t call them deformities. Transformations, let’s call them.”

“Then it happens to witches because they’re witches, if you call them transformations.”

“Why do you think it happens?”

“They got into a fight with another witch, who cursed them. Or, I don’t know, something about working with magic itself.”

“It’s the second one,” Lament said. “And it’s the reason we ever bother solving problems with words or actions instead of magic. People who use magic too much, for everyday tasks, let’s say—”

“Like Dam Willow, stirring the pots by magic,” I suggested.

“Exactly. People like that, they’re more likely to be transformed. A lot of witches don’t mind. Some of them embrace it.”

“You seem like you’d be someone who would embrace it,” I said.

Dam Lament laughed. “Yeah, I don’t care what people think of me. But I care about balance. Staying safe from transformation, that’s a good limit to put on yourself, if you ask me. Keeps you honest.”

I nodded.

“I think it’s kind of beautiful,” Espen said. He’d been listening from across the table. “I think being marked, it makes you honest to the world, about what you are.”

“I didn’t see you wearing the tabard of Ilthura the other day in The Gate when you wanted to pick a fight,” Dam Lament said.

“That’s because …” Espen started, but then he furrowed his brow hard, trying to come up with something. “That’s because I guess I’m wrong.”

Dam Lament laughed, then I laughed. Hex laughed too. I’d forgotten she was there. It was alright. Hex was treating me alright. I kept waiting for her to do something, for her to strike, but maybe things were getting better with her.

Hours later, when we finally stood to leave, Ilthura Espen grabbed first my wrist, then Dam Lament’s, pulling us closer so we could hear the words he spoke in a low voice.

“The Duchess is coming for all of us. Not just the Ilthurians, not just the brigands. She’s coming for the Order of the Vine, and you know it. We fight her together, or we die alone.”

It was so out of character from how he’d behaved all night that it startled me into taking his words seriously. I nodded, and Dam Lament nodded, and we left Set Porlock and made our way back to the covenant’s camp.

On the way back, in darkness scarcely lit by the moon filtered through trees, Hex shoved me into a creek again. Daidi laughed, and Lament did nothing, and I was miserable.

TEN

The next day, Dam Ghin roused us before dawn and led the whelps down to the beach to practice. I don't know that I'd slept more than an hour—I'd waited until everyone was asleep to sneak into the woods and change out of my soaking wet dress. And though I'd managed to stay sober the night before, all the sweet bread sat awkwardly in my stomach. I didn't want to be awake, let alone fighting.

"What's the matter, Lorel," Hex asked as we trudged out to the glade. "Didn't sleep? Were you cold or wet or something?"

Daidi laughed. Of course Daidi laughed. She never smiled, ever, except when Hex was being cruel. Then she laughed and cackled and laughed. I hated her as much as I hated Hex.

We stood in the stupid black sand that was going to work its way into all my clothing. The stupid wind was stupid cold. The stupid bugs screamed from the forest nearby.

After she finished lighting the braziers that stood in a familiar triangle, Dam Ghin asked, "What happens when you know you can't win a fight?"

"Avoid it," Haim said.

"When you can't?"

"Go down teeth thrashing, claws grasping, blood in your veins, death in your eyes," Daidi said, in some voice that was scarcely her own.

All the rest of us whelps stared at her. Her eyes were vacant and locked forward.

"Why?" the teacher asked. The wind whipped up just then, throwing sand and waves.

"Because that's what my mother taught me," Daidi said, sounding like herself again.

"There are two reasons why," the teacher said. "First, because you are not the only witch in this world. Collective self-defense means teaching everyone that witches are not easy victims. Your opponent may kill you, but they might give the next witch a wider berth. For every witch

drowned, burned, or left beside the road with a crescent moon carved into her face, I promise you there're at least two dead would-be witch hunters."

She smiled at that, her glass skin reflecting the colorful glow of the braziers.

"Second," she went on, "you fight because if you survive—if they only want to subdue you, for instance, or by some miracle you escape—you will be less emotionally damaged for having put up a fight."

I didn't want to fight Hex, I realized. But Dam Ghin was right, Daidi was right. Whether I wanted to fight or not, I had to. My problem with her wasn't going to go away on its own.

I resolved to myself that I'd hurt her that day at practice, the first chance I got. I'd make it look like an accident to any onlookers, but she'd know. She'd know what comes of pushing me into creeks. I couldn't turn her into a boar, not yet, but that didn't mean I was defenseless.

That day we practiced with poles, pretending they were spears. But the few times I fought against Hex, I was never able to land a solid enough blow. Even when we fought in groups, I never got a chance. The sun reached its peak and I still hadn't had my revenge. Another day.

Sandy and bloody, we trudged back to the shade of the nearby forest. Dam Sorrel met us with mail.

"How does …" I started to ask, "how do the letters …"

"It's good luck to pass along a letter to the Order," Sorrel said. "And bad luck—really bad luck—to tamper with our mail. These were waiting for us in Set Porlock."

Most of us whelps had letters. Hex didn't, Araneigh didn't. Haim had a package, which she opened on the spot. It was a beautiful new dress of black linen. Ankle-length, sleeveless, with a hood. All of us were immediately jealous.

I took my two envelopes and sat with my back against a tree. One was from my mother, sealed with plain white wax. The other was from Lane, sealed with the icon of a tower pressed into gray wax.

I got a little teary-eyed even before I opened them.

Lorel like a daughter to me,

I can only imagine that the witches read these letters. I just want to say that I'm well. The stables aren't the same without you, Ledston isn't the same without you, but of course that's the case. Grell and Jorge took the news … not well, but gracefully, all things considered. They had some worrisome things to say, about how people are getting all stirred up and such, how some of the knights are blaming everything on witches again. I'm sure it isn't as bad as the rumors of sailors make it out to be, but please be careful. Speaking of knights, have you heard from Lane? I

haven't had a word from her.

I love you. Be well. Be your best self. But for the sake of all that's holy, write me when you can.

Madrona

Lorel of the Vine,

Hi! It's me, Lane. I guess it probably said that on the envelope, above the super cool seal of the Knights of the King's Tower. I thought I was going to join the Brotherhood of the Dark, or maybe the Brotherhood of the Cup. The treacherous brothers! The great healers! But when I got to Deadman Castle, all the knights were all stirred up, witches this, witches that. Blight and sorrow and woe and nonsense. It was the Knights of the King's Tower that seemed to have its head on its shoulders. All they want to do is protect the kingdom from outside threats and ride around and do good deeds and all of that.

I passed their tests and now I'm a squire! Not to anyone specific yet. Got to wait a year—an entire year—before that. Still, I got a sword and a dagger and a pony and a brigandine coat and pretty much that's all a girl needs to be happy in this world.

They sent me to Oldking, to the Tower fortress in the shadow of King Sallow's castle. It's pretty cool. I'm having trouble making friends, but isn't that always the way of it with me. I'm too small and too hyper and too weird. I think one of the second year boys has a crush on me, so he's being nice, but you can't trust boys easy and that's just the way of it. We'll see.

Tell me everything! Well, almost everything. The Order reads my letters. Don't tell me stuff that's super spooky witchcraft secrets and don't tell me anything … you know … personal. But everything else!

I've decided you're allowed to have a new and temporary best friend. Just so long as you miss me.

Sincerely,

Your actual best friend, better than whatever witchto-be you're holding hands with,

Lane of the Lead and the Tower

(They let me keep my family title because they're awesome.)

It was more than I could handle. I wasn't the only one crying as we read letters from our family and friends.

I missed them. I missed them something awful. Sometimes decisions are just too permanent. Sometimes the fact that time only travels in one direction seems monstrously cruel.

I was also a little scared. Both Lane and my mom were worried about me.

Nearby, Araneigh sat cross-legged on the ground and took her hair in

and out of braids.

"No mail?" I asked, as gently as I could.

"Doesn't matter," she said.

I didn't know how to comfort her, since she wanted to be left alone. Dam Rose offered me pen and paper, and I wrote responses to Lane and my mother, which calmed me down a bit. I sealed both envelopes with black wax, stamped with the triangle of the Order of the Vine, and gave them to Dam Sorrel.

We weren't going to leave the beach until the next morning. A few of the witches went back to swimming, but with none of the joy they'd had the day before. The beach itself seemed cursed by the ashes of what we'd done.

A lone figure, bent-backed and ancient, stood over those ashes, looking out over the lake. Dam Willow. I went to stand next to her. It was hard to imagine losing a friend in such a terrible way.

"Ah, the Ledston girl," Dam Willow said. Only a hint of the sweetness in her voice remained. It was still there, though, under the sadness.

"I'm sorry about what happened," I said.

"I'm sorry too, of course," Dam Willow said. "It happens, when you get older, though. Everyone you know changes, or dies, or changes and then dies, or dies and then changes. That's the way of it."

She turned to look at me. I wanted to look away from her odd goat's eyes, but I made myself meet her gaze.

"You're different than the other whelps," she said. "I watched you, I've watched all of you. You're different."

"Oh?" I said, trying not to let worry show on my face.

"More feminine, somehow," Dam Willow said. "I can't quite put my finger on it."

Relief and warmth both flowed through me.

"I was never like that. Never feminine. Dam Heavens, though. She was. You remind me of her." She took a sharp breath in, whistling by accident. "Like how she used to be. How I'd like to remember her. Before, you know."

"Oh," I said. I didn't have words.

"But I've said too much, when I meant to stand here and mourn in silence. Mourn Dam Heavens, mourn Dam Fia, mourn my long-lost youth. Mourn how we age, dependent on the whims of something so chaotic as ley."

She turned away from me and looked out over the lake.

"Can you blame her?" she asked. "Always running, always chasing after wisps and strands of power. It's exhausting."

"She killed Dam Fia," I said.

“Aye. That she did. That she ought not have done. I don’t blame us for burning her for it, either. It’s just … it’s just nothing. I’m an old woman, and I’m tired. And I appreciate a girl like you hearing me out.”

“Of course.”

“Go play. Go be young, go be alive.”

I walked away, my head swimming. I didn’t know what to make of her. I started to feel a cold coming on, probably from lack of sleep. I decided to make my way up one of the creeks that fed the lake, to find a place to be alone and bathe.

Despite the thick canopy, there was one spot with direct sun. Birds sang their songs in the trees. I scanned the bushes around me, then took off my dress and walked naked out into the water to wash. Best way to fight a cold is to stay clean, my mom said. My dads said the opposite. I was my mother’s child.

I lay on my back in the sunshine, floating on the water, my peace only interrupted by my occasional sneezing. Sure, being around the witches was scary, but everything worth doing was scary. Being alive was scary. It was still better than the alternative. I was glad I wasn’t Dam Fia, or Dam Heavens. Or even Dam Willow, for all her power.

I scrubbed at my scalp with my nails—which I’d grown long now that I didn’t have to pretend I didn’t like girl stuff—and rinsed off almost a week’s sweat and grime. My skin was goosebumped from the water, yet the sun was burning hot, and the contrast was wonderful.

Something rustled in the bushes beside the creek and I shot upright. A face. Someone was watching.

I sank to my knees, hiding myself below the water, but I heard a gasp and it was clearly too late. I stood up and ran out of the water. Hex stood up and ran off.

She’d seen me. She would tell.

I had one chance, only one chance. Teeth thrashing, claws grasping, I had to scare her into silence. I threw on my dress and ran after Hex.

She had run upstream, away from camp, and I followed her as quietly and quickly as I could. Her footfalls soon grew too faint to hear over the burble of the creek, and after less than a minute I was sure I’d lost her.

I stood in the thick of the forest, in a spot where the trees were younger and denser. Which meant that someone had cut down this piece of forest at some point, most likely. Which meant loggers, or maybe homesteaders. I set off further into the young forest, and sure enough, I passed the stump of an ancient tree. From there, I found a deer path. From there, I found the decrepit remains of a hunter’s cabin.

It had been abandoned longer than I’d been alive, maybe longer than my mother had been alive. The roof had long since collapsed, the forest

doing its best to reclaim it. Still, the stone foundation came up to my knees, and the stone chimney thrust high overhead among the tops of the young pines.

Three small figures in black leaned against that chimney. One of them was chewing on a stalk of grass, another was tossing pebbles at a tree.

They didn't notice I was there, and I ducked behind a rotten log and peered out from around it.

Hex, Daidi, Araneigh.

Hex would tell. If she hadn't yet, I could run over and interrupt her. If she'd already told, then I was sunk.

I listened.

They weren't talking about me.

"You'll never make it that far," Daidi said.

"Maybe you will," Araneigh said.

"No, she won't."

"Even if I get home, you know what they do to witches?" Hex asked. "And I bet that includes whelps. They tie a stone to your feet and row you out to sea and throw you overboard and that's it. I've seen it happen with my own eyes three times. Two of those three probably weren't even witches, so what are the odds anyone's gonna believe I'm not one?"

She was going to run away.

I'd been stuck in my own head, thinking about my own problems. I'd been so busy thinking of Hex like she was one of the seventeen Lords of the Nether that I hadn't thought about how miserable she was. How she'd been, in essence, sold to the Order.

"Join up with some brigands," Daidi said.

"Opposite problem. Those honorless lumps would just drag me right back here so that the Order will love them."

She could join the Ilthurians, though.

I sneezed.

Araneigh pulled a hunter's axe from under her cloak and approached warily, while Daidi scanned the woods and Hex looked down at her feet like she'd been caught doing something wrong.

"It's me," I said, standing. "Lorel."

"Oh Great Mother, you scared us half to death," Araneigh said. She hooked her axe back through its loop on her belt. "How much of that did you hear?"

"You could join the Ilthurians," I said. "Ilthura Espen, he's probably still in Set Porlock. He'd take you."

"That …" Hex said, scrunching up her face as she thought it over, "that might work."

"I'll help," I said. "You'll need help."

“Anything to get rid of a girl you know is better than you?” Daidi asked. If she’d been a boy from my village, she would have snarled when she said it. Instead, she smiled too sweetly at me. “We don’t need your help.”

“Oh, no, she’s coming with us,” Hex said. She didn’t need to put the emphasis on *she*. Her point came across anyhow. “If she doesn’t want me to tell anyone her secret, she’ll help, and she won’t have a chance to rat me out. We’ll leave tonight.”

All my sympathy for Hex was gone like it had never been there.

I took a deep breath, trying to look dramatic, but instead I sneezed again.

“Yeah,” I said, wiping my nose on my bare arm. “I told you I’d help. I’ll help.”

ELEVEN

"So how'd you do it?" Hex asked. She'd cornered me as I walked back to camp from the woods, where I had walked far off the path to use the bathroom after dinner. We talked in hushed tones at the edge of camp. "Did you kill a little girl, pretend to be her?"

"I traded places with my friend."

"Why?" she asked. "Don't answer that. I know why. Because it's easy for you to want to be a witch, because for you it's a choice. I mean, it's not a choice you were supposed to get, since you're a boy."

"I hate being a boy. I wasn't supposed to be a boy."

"I hate being a witch. I wasn't supposed to be a witch."

"At least you have a plan to get out of being a witch," I said.

"I always thought you had been sold like a basket of apples and grew up to like it. That's why I hated you. But I can't hate you now. You're too stupid to hate."

I flinched a little at her words. She still had the power to sting me.

"Why d'you only hate me, not any of the others?"

Thunder cracked in the distance and the wind picked up. The sky had been clear and blue only an hour before.

"I don't know," Hex said. "The first time I pushed you in the water, I was just mad at you. And when I knocked you down at Araneigh's house. But then you embarrassed me, over and over again. You tied me to the bed. And you're always trying to make me look stupid in front of Araneigh."

"I am not," I said.

She glared at me.

"Okay. I was."

"Look, I'm not trying to say I'm sorry," Hex said, "because I'm not sorry—"

"I'm not sorry either," I cut in.

"We both got a bad deal. After you help me get out of this, I won't tell

anyone, and you can stay a witch long enough to learn how to curse yourself with womanhood or whatever your plan is."

"You can curse yourself with womanhood?"

"For the love of …" Hex yelped, but then she saw Dam Ghin passing by and lowered her voice. "Have you given this no thought at all?"

Even after months with the witches, I still hadn't really figured out what was possible. I just knew I wanted to be a witch, and a girl.

We stared at one another for an uncomfortable length of time. Two enemies joined by common—or comparable—purpose. I didn't trust that she wouldn't betray me, and she probably didn't trust me either.

The rain came suddenly, with only a few seconds of drizzle before it poured. We gave up trying to stare one another down and ran for the safety of the kitchen tarp.

A few of the apprentices sang to the ivy that crept up nearby trees, and soon it grew and wove a roof over our heads and walls down the sides. We stayed dry and warm underneath while the storm raged.

I helped in the kitchen, for lack of anything else to do. Dam Willow had gone home, and the witches who were cooking barely spared a word for me. Dinner was stew. Always stew. No bread, either, because there was no oven and we rarely had any flour.

At dinner that night, Daidi was cordial with me, and thanked me for helping make the stew, but it was obvious from the tone in her voice and the softness in her eyes that she wasn't excited to lose her best friend. Her only friend.

I knew I should have promised her, right then and there, that I'd be her friend once Hex was gone. But I didn't want to. I wasn't going to.

Hex bit at her nails and left her hair unbraided. She had talked back to Dam Ghin during lessons, which none of us ever did. The stress of knowing she was going to leave was clearly tearing her apart.

That night, those of us involved in the plan went to bed fully dressed, just with our boots off. In the middle of the night, the witches rose from their bedrolls all at once and, still in their nightclothes, walked out into the storm in a single-file line. Off to do whatever it was witches got up to in the middle of the night, perhaps some ritual.

I threw off my blanket and sat up. Daidi, Araneigh, Hex, and I looked at each other. We put our boots back on and donned our cloaks.

"Where are you going?" Henomi asked, rubbing her eyes.

"Nowhere," I lied, entirely too obviously.

"Goodbye, Henomi," Hex said.

"Goodnight, Hex," Henomi replied. Perhaps she'd misheard her, or been too sleepy to understand.

The four of us followed the swollen creek to the road, sometimes

wading through ankle-deep muck in the process. Between the trees and the clouds, not the slightest glimmer of moonlight reached us. Hex, warm in her sea-wool cloak, walked at the front of our group with a lantern while the rest of us picked our way over roots and rock as best we could.

After ten minutes, we reached the road. The ancient king's roads were well built, if oddly placed, and our lantern light glinted off the road's thick paving stones which stood above the flood.

"Hold."

The word came from above us, from the trees, startling us. Daidi jumped.

A figure in black swung down from a nearby branch to stand on the cobbles, a battle-axe held loosely at her side. Even with her face hidden in the depths of her hood, I recognized Dam Lament.

"What are you doing?" Lament asked.

Hex stepped forward, keeping Lament's attention—and ire—firmly on herself. "As we please," she said.

Dam Lament laughed. "What is it you please to do?"

"I'm leaving," Hex said. "I don't want to be a witch, so I won't be one. Even if you throw me in the creek and drown me, I won't be a witch."

Dam Lament said nothing to that. The rain kept up its steady rhythm as it fell from the leaves and needles above us.

"Well?" Hex demanded.

"Well what?"

"Are you going to let us pass?"

Dam Lament sighed. "Some sisters would have your hide for leaving, or even talking to one of us like that. Have your hide literally. Make a cloak out of you. Not most of us, but some. I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I suppose you think you're off to Set Porlock? Off to what, join the brigands? Maybe the Ilthurians? All of you?"

"Just me," Hex said, looking back over her shoulder to indicate the basket she carried.

"And you dragged the rest of these whelps along?"

"We weren't going to let her travel the woods alone," I said. I stepped forward and stood next to Hex.

Daidi and Araneigh stepped forward too.

For the first time, I saw Dam Lament's face. For all the good it did me: her face was as emotionally expressive as a sword.

"One day, the lot of you will be witches," Dam Lament said. "If you live that long. The fate of the Order is your fate too. And it looks like you've made up your mind about what's best."

"So you'll let us go?" Hex asked.

"I'm not going to stop you."

Hex started crying, all at once, with relief. Daidi put her arm around Hex, and Hex buried her head on Daidi's shoulder.

"The roads aren't safe," Dam Lament said. "I've been keeping watch, and there are brigands. They're likely trying to find our camp. I have a hard time imagining what they think they could do if they succeeded, but I don't have a hard time imagining what they could do to a small group like you."

"Come with us then," I said. "Keep us safe."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I think you should go back to camp. I think Hex is too young to know what she wants. I think she should stay and make up her mind after she comes of age."

"We'll be okay," Daidi said. "We've been practicing together. We know how to defend ourselves."

"I'm not going to argue with you," Dam Lament said. She jumped up, caught the branch, and pulled herself back into the tree, never letting go of the axe. It must have been hell on her to have been wounded so long. And as skilled a warrior as she was, she must have a good sense of what did and didn't count as danger.

The only thing worse than dealing with Dam Lament's disappointment was dealing with her indifference.

Hex started off down the road, picking up a large branch as a cudgel. I found one too. I didn't share Daidi's faith in our abilities to fend off brigands, but it still felt better to have that weight of wood in my hands.

We didn't go far along the road before we passed a patch of blight. It was easy to see in the dark and the rain because the ice-cold trees turned everything to mist around them.

The blight kept going and going, and the fog got denser. We walked maybe ten minutes in that white darkness, my ears at attention for every little noise of the forest. Once, I jumped at my own shadow as I rounded a bend and caught up with the lantern.

I didn't hear the brigands though, not until it was too late.

"Well, little girls," someone said.

I jumped again, my heart rising into my throat. This time, the voice came from the fog to our right. We stopped, most of us. Araneigh darted into the dark of the forest to our left.

Five people stepped out onto the road and into the light. The largest wore a boar skull as a necklace—the man from the tavern. The man who had plenty of reason to dislike witches.

"One step closer and we'll turn you back into a pig," I said.

The lead brigand flinched, and his friends laughed at his moment of

weakness. Why would anyone want friends who laugh at your weakness?

"I don't think so," the man said. "I don't think you can. I think you're children, lost in the woods. We'll take good care of you. We'll even bring you back home, once the Order pays us a good ransom."

Hex stepped forward, hefted her club, and swung all in one motion like we'd practiced. The man stepped back and Hex only managed to crack the boar skull.

We were outmatched in every way—numbers, size, training, equipment.

Teeth thrashing, claws grasping.

I stepped to the closest brigand, a woman with gray hair and gray clothes, and thrust the end of the club at her face. It was a move I'd trained in practice: thrust at her face, then swing while she flinched.

The brigand didn't flinch, though.

She just moved her head a few inches back, out of my range. The flat of her axe struck my jaw and I fell to the ground. It was over before it began. I don't know that one of us landed a single blow.

The brigands were laughing again, all together, at us. I struggled to my feet, dizzy and disoriented.

One of them, a thin man whose face was carved as much by scars as it was by wrinkles, had an arm around Daidi's throat. He hadn't even bothered to draw his sword.

"You're just children," the man said, almost kindly. "There's no shame in giving up. We won't hurt you, not even a little."

Ten paces behind the brigands, a small silhouette darted across the road.

"What do you want?" I asked. It was hard to talk with my jaw in so much pain. It was likely dislocated. I took a half step forward to draw attention to myself and half collapsed in a fit of coughing. The coughing wasn't on purpose.

"I told you," the boar skull man said. "Ransom. Witches walk these woods and these roads and don't do a thing for the little man. Now, get up, follow me."

"You're the little man?" I asked, mocking him.

"Everyone else who travels the valley pays the toll," he said, not rising to the bait. "It's time you witches do too."

He was being earnest, I realized. He actually believed that he was owed something. But that was no excuse for kidnapping.

Behind him, in the trees, I saw Araneigh closing in on him, axe drawn. I just had to keep them all looking at me instead of the woods.

"The witches don't pay their way in services rendered?" I asked. "That's what they tell us."

“Services?” he roared. “Services? Like what? Turning me into a boar?”

He turned to his fellows for support. I didn’t want him looking anywhere but at me.

“You were already a boor.”

He slapped me across the face, on the same cheek that had been smashed with the flat of an axe. I flinched. Araneigh darted out from the trees, grabbed ahold of the man’s hood, and climbed his back. In half a second, she had her knees around his waist and her small axe at his throat.

He froze.

“We’ll be on our way,” I said. Pain flared in my mouth.

“You’ll be on your way,” the man agreed, through gritted teeth.

“Run!” Araneigh yelled. “We’ll meet you at camp!”

Hex and I ran. I looked behind us in time to see Daidi run into the woods. Then I heard a man scream, and Araneigh jumped off the brigand just as he collapsed into the road.

She’d cut him. She’d cut his throat.

I faltered.

Hex grabbed my hand and we ran into the cold mist.

TWELVE

“Why … what …” I couldn’t get out sentences. I could barely get out words. My lungs were on fire; I couldn’t find my breath. We stumbled out of the woods into the town of Set Porlock. The public house glowed, welcoming and threatening, all at once.

“She had to do it,” Hex said.

“Did she?” I genuinely didn’t know.

Hex didn’t answer me. I walked up the road certain that someone—a witch, a knight, a brigand, anyone—would stop us. No one did. It was only the two of us. Somewhere in the woods behind us were our friends, who were in danger.

About half of the dozen or so people in the bar looked up when we came in. The harp sat unplayed. No brigands, I realized. Only locals.

The barkeep stood behind the bar, sipping from a large clay decanter. Confusion flickered across her face.

“You’d think a storm would keep the brigands in town, under shelter,” I said, putting on a smile I didn’t feel. She didn’t return it.

“They went off north,” she said. “A couple companies of tax knights heading this way.” Her decanter made a startlingly loud boom when she set it down on the bar. We were both still jumpy.

“Is Espen gone?” Hex blurted out. Then she slowed down. “Sorry, I mean, Ilthura Espen, is he still here?”

“You can’t get rid of a louse once it knows there’s blood in your scalp,” she answered. “He’s here.”

“We have business with him, then,” I said, trying to sound as adult as I could.

She turned to a boy about half my age, likely her son.

“Uh huh,” the boy said, running off up the stairs before the barkeep could even tell him what to go do. In a moment, he was back and dragging a sleepy, half-dressed teenaged knight. Espen smiled when he saw me, though, like it woke him up.

He probably thought I was a girl. I didn't mind the attention.

We sat at a table and to my shock, he asked only for rose tea.

"How do I sign up?" Hex asked as soon as he turned his attention to us.

"What?"

"The Ilthurian knights. How do I sign up?"

"Aren't you already spoken for?"

I laughed. Hex glared at me.

"I don't want to be a witch," Hex said, "and I can't go home, and to hell with being a peasant or a brigand, and you and I both know none of the other brotherhoods will take me."

"That's … I mean …" Espen fumbled with words until he was saved by the barkeep bringing us three mugs of tea. "Is this both of you?"

Hex looked at me to answer. Especially since we'd burned Dam Heavens, I'd given it a lot of thought, wondering what they'd do to me if they found out about me. And the Ilthurian knights had a lot to recommend them. But I'd made up my mind a long time before. Witches work magic. I'd said I was going to be a witch, so a witch I would be.

"Just her," I answered.

Espen nodded and turned back to Hex.

"Maybe I should have wanted to be an outlaw knight since I was only as tall as this table," Hex said. "Maybe I'm not the best candidate. But I want to be a knight, and I bet you get a lot of your recruits from people in worse situations than me. Sign me up."

"Do you know what's involved?" he asked.

"You gotta do good knight stuff, like protect people and all of that. And instead of Dam or Sir, you take the title Ilthura, after your founder. And you also make up your own rules—"

"Tenets," Espen said.

"Make up your own tenets. They can be whatever you want. Also, you're an outlaw, even more officially than witches are."

"That, albeit crudely, about sums it up. Ilthurian knights fight against authority. The other knights … they *are* authority. Locking people up and all of that. That's why our tenets are individualized. It's to remind us that there is no one code of law or honor that can apply to everyone."

"Why not just do it like the witches, then," I asked, "and do away with law and formal codes of honor?"

Espen looked at me and shrugged, then took a swallow of tea. "Oww that's hot. Oww oww oww." He put the mug down and answered me, speaking slowly over his burnt tongue. "The Order of the Vine has its own laws and code of honor, whether they admit it or not. It's just flexible in a different way."

"Okay, so sign me up," Hex said.

"You've seen sixteen years?"

"Yeah."

"The other witches going to come after me over this?"

"Probably not?"

Espen laughed. "Alright," he said. "You can join."

I spent the next hour at that table, talking and laughing with the two of them, along with a few locals who drifted in and out of our orbit. As soon as Hex considered herself free from the Order, she was a different person. She was almost my friend.

"You going to change your name?" I asked her. "I figured your parents named you Hex because you were promised to the Order."

"Not going to change it," she said. "I mean, all my life I've hated my name because it meant I had to be a witch. But now I don't have to be. So … it's a reminder of who I didn't have to be. Who I got to choose to be."

I nodded. The inn was warm and dry, and the company was oddly comfortable. But the main reason I lingered there was fear. On the way to town, I'd pushed myself through danger because I had a purpose. Heading home by myself, through blight and brigands, was almost too much to fathom. I was still worried about Araneigh and Daidi, hoping they were okay. If Araneigh had really cut that man's throat, then likely the rest of the brigands would be too busy to run after anyone in the dark. But there were also blighters about. And tax knights.

"My first tenet, Lorel," Hex said, acting a bit drunk though I knew her to be sober, "is that I'm going to take your secret with me to the grave. You more than upheld your side of the bargain."

"You can't make tenets until we've inducted you," Espen said. "And that's a bit more specific than most."

"Whatever. Either way, Lorel of the Vine, I will take your secret with me to the grave. On my honor as a nothing, because right now I'm a nothing."

I put my arm around her shoulder, and she hugged me around the waist, and it was all I could do to keep myself from crying on her.

I was surprised to realize I was going to miss her.

"You have a secret?" Espen asked. I just smiled.

When I decided it was time to face my fears and head home, Espen offered to escort me. It wouldn't do to let anyone, not even an Ilthurian, know where the covenant was camped. We talked it over and compromised—he'd take me as far as where the road hit the creek.

When Espen went off to his room in search of traveling clothes, Hex looked at me and caught my eyes. She stared at me intently, and for half a moment, I was frightened of her again.

"Dam Catkin," she whispered.

“Who’s Dam Catkin?” I asked. I wracked my brain, but of the dozens of witches at camp, I had never heard of a Dam Catkin.

“Just a rumor I heard, when I was a little girl, about a witch who—” Hex saw Espen returning and cut herself off. “A witch who you should know about.”

“Who’s that?” Espen asked as he sat back down with us.

“No one,” Hex answered.

“So mysterious!”

“And another thing,” Hex said. She stood up and took off her cloak. The one woven from sea-wool, with the tail on the hood. She handed it to me.

“I can’t …”

“What do I need a sea hag’s cloak for?”

“Your father made you that cloak.”

“Yeah, because he sold me to witches. I’m not going to be a witch. You are. Take it.”

I took it, and gave her mine.

She hugged me aggressively, pushing her head into my chest. “Hug Araneigh and Daidi just like this,” she said. “I don’t like you very much, but I’ll still never forget you.”

After she let go, I cried for a moment until it turned into a fit of coughing.

“You ready?” Espen asked when I had caught my breath.

Espen promised Hex that he would return shortly, and we left.

As we set off into the woods, Ilthura Espen held a glass knife in one hand and a wooden club in the other. Both looked handmade. He must have caught me looking and wondering, because he explained them to me.

“My first tenet is to never hurt people with metal.”

“Why?” I walked in front with Hex’s lantern while Espen followed just behind me.

The rain had tapered off finally. An owl called from a branch nearby and, startled, I dropped the lantern. Nothing broke, and the candle didn’t go out, luckily. We kept walking.

“I grew up in a border town about two days north of here. Not a lot there, but it’s got this mountain fort that’s worth a lot, strategically. Duchess Helte and Baron Keikan both say it’s theirs, they have basically forever. At least once every couple years, their knights come marching through town with their steel to kill each other over that pile of rocks. They save their swords for the enemy, sure, but gauntlets broke plenty of commoners’ noses, my own included. So I decided not to hurt people with metal. It’s sort of symbolic.”

“Doesn’t that make fighting hard?”

“Yeah, definitely. But I gotta be honest, I fight a lot harder when I figure I’m outmatched.”

“What are your other tenets?” I asked. We weren’t yet at the patch of blight, but already there was mist. It was likely almost dawn.

“Just one other one so far,” he said. “No romance or sex. No girlfriends, no boyfriends, no nothing.”

Two emotions fought in my brain. First was disappointment. The second, though, was relief.

Only then did I realize how dangerous it had been to let this man escort me home by myself. I wasn’t used to being treated as a girl by men, not really, so I wasn’t yet used to the ways in which men—even men you know, or who seem nice—can be dangerous.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Sometimes I try to come up with big words about it and make it seem like it’s some moral thing,” he said, “but honestly it’s just because I’m not really attracted to people. People used to tease me about it all the time, so I just made it a tenet, and now everyone leaves me alone.”

“I’m half that way, I think,” I told him. “I do like people. I’m attracted to people. But not nearly so much or so often as it seems like everyone else around me is. Especially compared to the other boys back home.”

“To the other boys back home?”

I was so tired I’d slipped up. “I mean, I wasn’t attracted to many of the boys back home.” I didn’t look at him, trying to be casual, hoping he’d forget it.

After a moment’s pause, he just said, “Yeah.” He either believed me or was just willing to let me be evasive. “It’s annoying how fixated everyone is on it. Sex and romance, like those are the only ways to connect with people.”

As we went deeper into the woods, we stopped talking to avoid drawing unwanted attention to ourselves, and Espen fell back about ten paces behind me. Hopefully, any would-be assailant would see me walking alone with a light and try to sneak behind me, where Espen was.

I spent the entire walk overthinking what would happen if we were attacked and worrying about Araneigh and Daidi. When we reached the blight, I got twice as nervous. Then I saw blood on the paving stones—probably from our fight.

Fear swept over me in a rush. I wanted to run. I knew it would be less safe than walking, but I still felt like running. I wanted to be home—not at camp, but with my mom—and I wanted to be safe. I never wanted to put myself in harm’s way again. If only I’d been a stablehand!

I kept walking. The fear didn’t go away, not really, but I managed to stuff it down so far into my gut that I could think straight.

Finally, we reached the bridge over the creek.

"Wait," Espen said, catching up with me.

I froze.

"There's someone in that tree. Don't point the light. Just look."

I looked. Dam Lament was still keeping watch, so many hours later.

I cooed a birdcall and she responded.

"It's okay, you can leave me here," I said.

He didn't argue, he just said, "Till next we meet, Lorel of the Vine," and left. That made me even more fond of the man.

Once his footfalls receded, Dam Lament dropped back down from the tree and faced me.

"Did Araneigh and Daidi—" I started to ask.

"They're okay. They came by a few hours ago, upset but unharmed."

I breathed out like I'd been holding my breath for hours.

"Hex is staying with the Ilthurians?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked.

"Not about the whelps," she answered.

"Why not? You're always watching over us, but you never interfere."

"When I was a whelp," she said, "there were six of us in my coven. Three of us girls came alone, and then there was a set of triplets, all named after trees. Oak, Alder, Birch. They were mean. They bullied us, like Hex was doing to you. The other three of us teamed up to stop them, and it was like we had our own little war."

"That sounds awful," I said.

"It was, but we were handling it. One night, the six of us met at the top of a waterfall for what was basically a peace talk. It was hard, and we talked for hours, but we finally started to make sense of our differences. A storm came, and on the hike back down, one of my friends fell and broke her neck. She died.

"The older witches blamed Oak, the biggest bully. Oak was sent home, cursed to never work magic. Alder blamed us for having told the witches, even though we hadn't. She and Birch found my other friend alone and strangled her. In response, the witches turned Alder and Birch into their namesakes."

I didn't know what to say. She looked pensive, a bit sad, in the dim flicker of the lantern light.

"What I learned, that day, was … if you've got two people with the same amount of power as one another, and they're arguing, there's no reason to expect that interference from someone with more authority is going to make anything better. My job is to keep you lot safe from the world, not from each other."

I never would have been able to talk to Hex the same way if Dam Lament had been siding with me. Our little war would have escalated and we never would have found common ground.

“You should get back, try to sleep,” Dam Lament said. “We’re leaving first thing in the morning.”

“Oh!” I’d almost forgot. “The brigands are leaving, because tax knights are flooding the valley.”

“I know,” Dam Lament said. “But thank you.”

Lament turned her back to reach for the tree once more, but I stopped her.

“Dam Lament,” I said.

“Yes?”

“Who was Dam Catkin?”

“Who told you about Dam Catkin?” she asked, suspicion in her voice. She didn’t turn back to look at me.

“I’m not going to say,” I told her.

She turned back toward me, looking me over more intently than ever before.

“Why do you ask?”

“It’s nothing,” I said. She wasn’t going to tell me anything that night, that much I knew. “I’ll just go to bed.”

My head full of questions, I hurried back through the dark as the rain began again.

→ THIRTEEN ←

The first light of the day found its way into the forest as I crept under the ivy pavilion. Everyone else was still asleep, and I walked straight to my bedroll and dropped face-first onto it.

I woke up when the rain stopped, some hours later. Araneigh sat at my feet.

"Good morning," she smiled.

"That was …" I couldn't put my thoughts together on such little sleep. Then I remembered that the last time I'd seen Araneigh, she'd drawn a blade across a man's throat. "Why'd you cut him?" I asked. Which might not be the most polite thing to ask someone first thing after you wake up, but it was all I could see when I looked at her. I wasn't afraid of her, not quite. What I felt was closer to awe.

"I didn't kill him. Just got him bleeding."

"I didn't say you killed him."

"Didn't want him to follow us. If his friends helped him keep pressure on the cut, he'll be fine. Well, not fine. But like, alive."

That was a relief, for some reason.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"A couple hours since dawn," she said. "We're about to head out."

The witches outside stood impatiently. I rolled up my blanket, put it in my basket, and strapped my basket to my back as quickly as I could.

I noticed the witches' fists gripped spear shafts tightly. Hands rested on sword pommels. Dam Sorrel held her shield in hand instead of slung across her back. Most likely, the tax knights were coming. Dam Lament paced the perimeter of camp, her witchbladed spear at the ready. Each of us whelps were handed weapons—I took an axe, the same as Araneigh.

Dam Rose had a birdcage under a shroud. Unless they'd found another one, this one was Dam Heavens's. Had been Dam Heavens's. The other one, from before, she'd left at Dam Willow's cabin.

After the waxed linen tarp had been rolled and stowed, after the

apprentices had chopped down their ivy pavilion, the only signs of our stay were a firepit and mud. Even that was too much to leave behind, evidently, because Dam Alectoria started a song. The other crones joined in. The air turned red.

No words were spoken in the witch song. The song brought black tendrils up from the earth. They started as finger-sized shoots, then slowly grew taller, standing out against the ground like oil against water.

I was hypnotized.

Everywhere the tendrils touched, the mud dried and ferns and saplings grew. The tendrils edged their way toward our campsite and the forest reclaimed the space. I watched the shadows dance.

“Black is the color of life, of potential,” Dam Rose whispered to us. “Black is the color of loam and the void.” She was nervous. Excited, maybe.

Silhouettes, human silhouettes, appeared at the edge of the witchlight. I couldn’t figure out what part they had in the spell, because for long moments, they just watched.

The whispering of witches cut through the song.

“Whelps, get ready,” Lament said, ceasing her pacing. She didn’t bother to whisper.

The first arrow dissolved in the red glow before it could reach Dam Alectoria, but its intent was clear.

Knights stepped into the clearing. They were all around us, in ranks five deep. More than two hundred strong. A few were mounted, the rest on foot. Tax knights, their silver tabards adorned with a golden circle.

“What do we do?” Araneigh asked. She had her axe in her hand, eying the knights who stood less than twenty paces away.

“We wait,” Dam Lament said in a low voice, “and then we run.”

“All of us?” I asked.

“Hopefully,” she replied. Her eyes never left the enemy.

“What are we waiting for?” Araneigh asked, casting her gaze around every which way. I’d rarely seen her nervous, even when we’d faced the brigands the night before.

“Advance!” a male voice called, echoing through the trees. The front line of knights stepped forward, into the ring of witchlight. Honestly, I was impressed by their bravery—I didn’t think all the arrows and axes in the world could bring down Dams like Ilma, Ghin, and Alectoria. Not when they were prepared. Not when they stood, ancient and powerful, joined in witch song.

“For that,” Lament said.

The shadow tendrils wrapped around the legs of knights and horses. Wherever they touched, flowering buds broke free from skin.

The knights fought back, cutting through the black ethereal vines with their swords. A mounted unit crashed through the line of infantry and charged for the center of our circle, where the eldest witches stood.

"Run," Lament said.

The charging knights leveled their lances at the chests of the witches. I stared.

"Run!" Lament said, grabbing me by the collar of my dress and starting toward the east. I grabbed the girl next to me by the hand—Daidi, it turned out—and she grabbed another in turn, and we all ran.

Witches and apprentices had already started to clear the path, forcing their way through the encircling knights by work of staff and blade and magic. I saw at least one witch go down under the blow of a sword, but I didn't have time to think about it. We sprinted in the wake of the witches in front of us, and others came behind us, a flood of women bursting over a broken dam.

We climbed through brush and thorn, uphill always. It was endless. Lament and Rose kept us between them and counted us constantly. More than once, as we all began to tire, one of the dams sang a few lines of song and we found new energy. Witches in front of us cleared the undergrowth by magic, and witches behind us wove bramble across our path.

The knights, fully armored and without magic, couldn't keep pace. We left them behind quickly, though we drove ourselves onward still.

We finally stopped atop a hill that overlooked where our camp had been. The majestic lake was even bigger than I had imagined, and reached out almost to the horizon. On its near shore, I saw the forest around our former campsite lit up by bursts of fire and light.

I thought about the witch I'd just seen die, about the grim determination on her face. She hadn't had time to realize what was happening to her. In my sixteen years of life before joining the witches, I'd only ever seen two people die—a sick merchant who'd died in my mother's care when I was a child, and my mother's mother, whose heart had given up while she walked with me, carrying a basket of beets. Two people in sixteen years.

I'd already seen two witches die in the past few days, and I didn't want to know what happened to the knights who had sprouted flowers from their skin.

I had a feeling I'd see more death soon.

"We're going to split back into covens," Dam Rose said. "We'll reconvene in a few weeks, somewhere safe."

I didn't want to part from the other whelps. I looked at Haim and Henomi—even at Daidi. Daidi held her doll to her chest.

Dam Rose saw my reluctance. “It’s never safe for us to be in such large numbers without enough ley to draw upon.” She put her hand on my shoulder. “You’ll see everyone again soon.”

“What about our training?” I asked.

“You’ll have plenty of that. More than you want.”

After we parted, our coven walked north, away from the mountains and further into the duchy proper. We followed winding paths near streams and rivers, staying deep in the forests when we could. Even us whelps went armed.

Dam Lament and I, disguised as mother and son again, stopped in a few towns to buy basic provisions. Somehow, disguising myself as a boy felt right—it reinforced the idea that being a boy was the costume, the disguise. Being a girl was my natural state.

We bought a cauldron and blankets to replace what we’d lost when we’d fled. We bought grains from farmers, dried meat from hunters. No one paid us much mind. We told no one we were witches, though.

We heard rumors that the Order of the Vine was spreading plague and conspiring against the Duchess. We heard other rumors that Duchess Helte had sold her soul to the Nether Lords and gained the power of the dark gods and that only witches could stop her. The second set of rumors seemed about as fanciful as the first, but they were much nicer to hear.

Every morning, as promised, Dams Lament and Rose woke Araneigh and me up before dawn and trained us. We had no wooden blades, so for half our practices, we used poorly balanced sticks, while the other half were tempered by the danger of actual weapons. We focused on control.

It didn’t feel right without Hex there, which surprised me. Even though I’d hated her, I’d grown used to having her around. And she’d been a good training partner, sometimes, since I’d always been on edge when I fought her.

For the most part, we drilled. Over and over, we practiced monotonous movements. Strike. Parry. Strike. It wasn’t fun, like the games had sometimes been. To hear Lament tell it, fun would get us killed. Improvisation would get us killed. In crisis, you fell back on what you’d drilled. Muscle memory led to victory.

I thought about the brigands often while we trained. I never wanted to feel powerless like that again. Those thoughts kept me focused through the monotonous routines.

After practice, with the sun high overhead, we ate breakfast together. Traveler’s stew was getting old. At nearly every meal, we ate whatever roots and vegetables we could forage to throw into the cauldron, thickened with whatever grain we had. On occasion, Dam Lament or Araneigh would kill a rabbit or a squirrel, which gave the stew a bit of

variety. I helped cook most days, and Araneigh and I did most of the washing up every day.

Each morning, the witches talked about their plan. Their plan seemed to be that they didn't have a plan, not yet. Lament and Ilma argued in favor of taking revenge against the blighters and tax knights, but Alectoria, Rose, and Sorrel were solidly against taking any action as only one coven. We would stay on the move to keep safe until we heard from the rest of the covenant or got new information.

The only thing that changed from day to day were our surroundings. Sometimes we drilled in tall grass, other times on narrow paths through the mountains or at the edge of the small lakes scattered everywhere across the highlands. We fought for hours every morning, then walked until late into the night.

I never got privacy to bathe. I slept uncomfortably on the hard ground. I was tired, always tired. My feet had stopped complaining after the first week of my life on the road, but every other muscle in my body was pushed to its limit nearly every day. I was desperate for a break.

I got to know the witches even better, though. Ilma was always ready for action. She'd spent a lifetime gathering her power, and she wasn't afraid to show the world. Alectoria was full of wisdom and loved to offer it. I'd always thought Dam Lament was inscrutable and cold, but eventually I realized that she showed affection in ways other than words. She showed how much she cared for us by always making sure we were safe.

Now that they were peers, I saw a true friendship blossom between Dam Sorrel and Dam Rose. They often gathered herbs and wild foods together, and took the time to weave wildflowers into each other's hair. One afternoon, I let Dam Rose braid my hair into a crown braid, woven through with flowers. Dam Willow had claimed I was more feminine than the other whelps, so I figured why not embrace that?

Even better than getting to know the witches, I got to know Araneigh. We trained together every morning, we walked together every day. We slept side by side most nights. I slept on my back, while Araneigh slept on her side, tossing and turning. Whenever she'd wake me up, I found myself wishing she'd put her head on my chest and her arms around me. I didn't have the courage to ask her to, though.

Each night, after the witches thought we were asleep, they'd file off together to do whatever it was they did. It could have been anything, really. Maybe they gossiped. Maybe they turned into foxes and hunted in the forest, or became deer and raced through the night. Maybe they lived half their lives in the red world. I would know, one day.

Some days we backtracked. Some days, we walked in a giant circle and

slept in the same place twice. We did whatever was necessary to follow the ley and stay clear of the knights who hunted us. More and more, while we wandered, I found myself siding with Dam Lament and Dam Ilma—we shouldn't run forever.

One morning, we were training how to fight on a steep hill a little ways outside our camp. I was squared off against Dam Rose, who beat me repeatedly even though I had the higher ground, when Sorrel came and whispered something in Lament's ear.

"Practice is over for the day," Lament told us. "Got to get moving."

The tedium of walking and the tedium of drilling were about equal to me, so I wasn't much disappointed. Try as Rose might, though, she wasn't able to hide the concern on her face.

We started back to camp, but the other witches met us when we were halfway there. Dam Ilma handed me my basket.

We hiked into the rockiest part of the foothills, climbing a steep and perilous path. When we stopped for lunch, I looked back down the way we'd come and saw horses gathered at the place where we'd been camped, at least thirty of them. The horses were all black, and all their riders wore midnight blue. The Brotherhood of the Dark. That didn't make sense. Was every brotherhood in Cekon tracking us?

The coven kept its composure, but it was strange to think that we'd been hunted for weeks, and that with the life I'd chosen, I'd likely be hunted by some authority or another until I died, regardless of whether or not I broke the law. With all the power held by witches, maybe being hunted was what kept us in balance.

That night, I couldn't get my mind to rest. The witches rose again, walking off in single file, and I saw pale witchlight in the distance.

"Why don't we get to see the ritual you do every night?" I asked Lament the next evening as we ate a wildflower salad with our stew. "I'd like to see it and don't see why I shouldn't."

"You need to learn discipline first," Lament said.

"Why?" I asked. "We're not knights. Once I'm a witch, I'm equal to every one of my sisters."

"You'll need self-discipline," Lament said. "Discipline is the same as any other muscle or art or anything worth developing … it improves through practice. Externally imposed discipline is necessary sometimes when you're first learning."

"Like a crutch?" I asked.

"Exactly like that," Lament said. Even with how frustrated I was, I couldn't help but be proud at her praise. "As soon as possible, you should abandon the crutch of authority. But for now, you still need to learn discipline. Without it—"

“Without it I’ll get myself killed,” I finished for her. “You keep saying things like that, but I’m not sure I believe you.”

“Believe whatever you want,” she said. She picked a violet out of the salad, looked at it, and popped it into her mouth.

Dam Rose woke me and Araneigh up. The moon had set, but dawn was still hours off. We were camped under the boughs of an oak tree at the edge of a savannah.

The other witches were gone, though their bedrolls and packs were still laid out on the cracked, dry ground. Dam Rose motioned for us to follow her into the tall grass, so we did.

Not a hundred yards from our camp, we saw a massive dead beast, like an ox but twice as large and covered with white quills.

“What is it?” I asked, but Dam Rose looked at me and shushed me.

Dam Ilma walked widdershins around the creature, stopping once each rotation to pluck a quill from it. The rest of the coven stood nearby, dark silhouettes against a dark sky.

I was clearly supposed to watch, and clearly supposed to derive some kind of lesson, but I couldn’t make sense of what I was seeing. Had they killed this creature? For what purpose?

When I looked closer, I saw crossbow bolts, dozens of them, scattered among the quills. None of us carried cross-bows—someone else had done the killing.

Dam Ilma continued her slow circling, pulling quills. I grew restless, shifting my feet, and my mind and gaze began to wander.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw wisps of something white and purple, rising like smoke from the corpse.

I looked directly and it was gone.

I shifted my eyes out of focus again, and there it was, more definite. Ley. I was seeing ley.

I gasped.

Araneigh and I met one another’s gaze. She saw it too. Araneigh put her arm around my waist, Rose put her arm around my shoulder, and for the first time, I was not just seeing the effects of magic, I saw magic itself. It was flame and smoke and living tendrils, all at once. It was beautiful.

An hour later, when the night gave way to twilight, my ability to see the ley went with it. But Dam Ilma didn’t stop her ritual harvesting until the sun itself shone on us.

We walked back to camp all together. I was too tired to ask questions.

“How did you know we would be able to see it?” Araneigh asked.

“The death of a worson is a rare thing,” Dam Rose said. “They can live a hundred years unless they’re cut down by poachers for their teeth, like that one was. Ley pools in a worson stronger than it does in most other

animals. Add to that the darkness and the ritual, and I figured there was a good chance."

"Thank you," I whispered.

I wanted to go back to sleep in the shade of the oak tree more than I wanted just about anything in the world, but Dam Lament handed us shields and made us drill using them as weapons for hours.

Afterwards, at breakfast, the witches talked again. But this time, instead of discussing the movements of knights and brigands, they talked in vague words about where we might go. They wanted to perform some kind of ritual and needed to find the right place for it.

We broke camp and started into the forest, and I spent most of the day trying to see ley again, squinting my eyes and letting them focus at random. Mid-afternoon, as we walked alongside a creek, I looked cross-eyed down at my nose, and I could have sworn I saw a flicker of turquoise floating above the water, running with the current. I looked straight at it and lost it.

Araneigh laughed when I tried to look cross-eyed again. I looked up at her, and she copied my face, and I laughed too.

Rose looked at the two of us and smiled, and Lament shot us a dirty look, which was practically her version of smiling. Life can just be simple sometimes, and maybe bad things were on the horizon, but they weren't upon us at that moment.

Araneigh snaked her hand into mine, and I was too startled to pull it back. We walked hand in hand until the path narrowed again.

Lane had held my hand sometimes, when no one was around to tease us, though when she'd done it, she'd done it only as my friend.

Araneigh, though, was a mystery. I didn't know what she was hoping for from me. More importantly, I didn't know what I was hoping for from her.

Maybe I didn't need to know. Maybe I could just be happy to hold her hand.

A mile further on, I caught Araneigh looking cross-eyed at the creek. She gasped. I tried it, and I saw it too: the turquoise was back, stronger this time, cut through with black. Black, the color of life. Black, the color of possibility.

FOURTEEN

Well before sunset, we reached the base of a tall, curved waterfall that flowed into a perfect bowl before cutting into three separate streams. We set up camp on a large ledge of rock that jutted out twenty feet above the water.

Once I had laid out my bedroll and taken off my boots to give my feet a break, I walked to the edge and stared at the top of the falls, at the way that the cascading water caught the fading light, and at the pool beneath us. Especially at the pool beneath us.

Black ley spun in a whirlpool just above the surface. It was so thick I didn't have to squint or look away to see it. I stared and stared at that vortex of power. If I looked at it just right, I could make it go away, or I could make it come back.

The whole world had transformed now that I could see magic. Even if only sometimes. Even if I didn't know how to use it yet.

The sun had passed behind the trees, but heat rose off the rock, and the water looked cool and clear and deep. I barely noticed when Araneigh came and stood next to me. I barely noticed when she started talking, and I didn't really hear what she said. All I could do was stare down at the water and the ley.

I wasn't in control of my body. I wasn't in control of my mind. The next thing I knew, I took a half step back and jumped off the rock. I hadn't thought about it, I just did it. Air rushed past me and the cold water shocked me back to my senses.

A moment later, Araneigh crashed into the water next to me. I smiled at her underwater and she smiled back, her teeth gleaming through the clear water, past the cloud of hair and dress surrounding her.

The darkness beneath us rose to envelop her foot, and her smile disappeared. A moment later, I felt it too. A gelatinous muck crept between my toes, up to my ankles. I kicked for the surface, but I couldn't move. My feet were caught in a smoky jelly. I looked down and a huge

single eye with a star-shaped pupil looked back at me from the darkness below.

I screamed, all bubbles.

Araneigh reached out, and I grabbed her hand, but neither of us could escape. Panic set in and I kicked and thrashed, and almost got myself free. The jelly crept up to my ankles, to my shins. The eye moved ever closer. I was powerless.

I was going to drown. So was Araneigh.

I got angry. Not at the monster in the water beneath us, who kept staring with its one terrible eye, but at the witches. I was in their care, and they hadn't taught me enough magic to free myself. They hadn't even bothered to tell me that I shouldn't look into the pool because there was some kind of jellyfish squid living in there that would bespell me into jumping into the water to get eaten.

Words were useless and I didn't know any magic.

Action, maybe. *Teeth thrashing, claws grasping.*

I forced myself to calm down and let myself sink further into the creature. I was almost out of air. My lungs screamed as my vision darkened. I didn't want to die. Fiercely, furiously, I didn't want to die. I didn't want Araneigh to die.

I was enveloped to my knees, my feet almost as deep in the jelly as the creature's eye. I leaned over and thrust my open hand into the eye as hard as I could, stabbing at the pupil with my long nails.

The creature recoiled, diving back down into the water, dragging us along with it. Araneigh kicked, and I kicked, and we ripped ourselves free and shot up to the surface.

Hands, friendly hands, grabbed me under the arms and pulled us gasping to shore. We were safe.

I glared up at the witches. They were supposed to keep us safe. They were supposed to give us the tools to keep ourselves safe. I spat out water, rolled over, and heaved. It took a long time to catch my breath.

Hours later, as we ate our stew on the rocky outcropping above the pool, I had no appetite. I kept thinking about the creature twenty feet below us. It had lured me into the water, I was certain. Like I was a simple prey animal. Like I was the fawn that Dam Lament had put to sleep by magic.

I forced down my food by sheer willpower, because I'd walked all day and would presumably be walking all day tomorrow. I didn't listen to the conversation during most of the meal, not until the very end, when they spoke of the ritual to come.

"We should let them watch," Dam Sorrel said. "They've seen ley. They fought the talik."

Talik. That must be the name of the monster beneath us.

Dam Ilma opened her mouth like she was going to object, but she thought for a moment instead before responding. “Yes, I suppose they’re ready.”

Despite my exhaustion, despite my anger, I was excited.

After dinner, Araneigh and I brought the bowls down to the creek to wash them—well away from the pool and its monster. We hurried, both frightened of the woods and excited to see a ritual.

When we returned, Lament stood in the center of the camp, the other four witches in a tight circle around her, holding hands. Araneigh and I sat down just behind Dam Rose, with strict orders to say nothing, do nothing. I didn’t fidget, I barely even blinked.

They sang witch song and brought us into the red realm. Everything was hazy except for Lament, who glimmered in the light. She took off her dress. Her body was a maze of scars. Dam Ilma handed her a white worson quill, and Lament scratched a rune lightly into her chest. It didn’t draw blood. Dam Ilma handed her another quill, then another. For an hour, Dam Lament scratched runes into her body, unflinching and calm. It was the longest I’d ever spent in the red realm.

Dam Alectoria handed Dam Lament a witchbladed dagger. Dam Lament held it aloft, and for the first time that evening, she smiled, ever so slightly. She had a beautiful smile that betrayed her usually severe face. The dagger glinted in the light.

The witch song rose in volume. The four witches surrounding Lament rose into the air. They stood on nothing, a hand’s breadth above the ground, their bare feet pointed down.

Dam Lament’s smile disappeared and she took four deep breaths. She breathed in as deep as she could. She touched the tip of the dagger to her eye, and I closed my own reflexively. If I was going to be a witch myself, I couldn’t flinch from things like this. I opened my eyes again. Blood ran down Lament’s face. She held the knife down at her side, lifted her face to the sky, and cried out—a battle cry.

The song grew louder still, impossibly loud, and the witches rose five, now ten feet in the air. Lament ran underneath them to the edge of the rock and dove headfirst into the pool, knife still in her hand.

The witches descended, the song stopped. The red realm faded away and we were left in the real world, like waking slowly from a dream.

No one stirred. As far as I could tell, no one even blinked. For minutes of terrible silence, nothing happened. I remembered the terrible feeling of the talik surrounding me, pulling me under.

I heard a splash, then Lament returned. Black and turquoise ley was spinning off of her, a slow-motion cyclone rising into the night. She held the eyeball of that terrible creature, larger than the head of a cow, in her

hands. Her own eye, the one she'd put a knife to, was shut. Presumably, it was shut forever. The other shone bright in the moonlight, its pupil shaped like a star.

No power without sacrifice.

"There's a place underneath The Wanderer, a deep place, a dark place." Lament's lips moved, but it wasn't her voice. It was two harsh inhuman voices, high-pitched and low-pitched at once. "The cold seeps from the deep place into the waters of Lake Leur."

"That is where we'll find the blighters?" Dam Alectoria asked.

"Beneath the mountain you will find the cold."

The ley spun up and away from Dam Lament, and she suddenly screamed in her own voice, collapsing to her hands and knees, as all the pain she'd held at bay came crashing into her.

"Why?" I asked Dam Rose the next day as we made our way back out of the forest on the same road we'd taken to enter it. Lament stumbled along at the front of the group, flanked by Ilma and Alectoria, who kept hands on her shoulders, supporting her.

"The creature we killed, the talik, it knew things," Dam Rose told me. "We killed it for power, the same way we might kill a boar for food."

"It was worth Lament's eye?"

Rose stopped and looked at me. "More of us are going to die in this fight, probably soon. The blight is spreading fast, and as the blight spreads, the blighters' power grows. The sooner we confront them, the better. Lament felt it was worth her eye, and I agree."

"So what are we going to do now?"

"Get messages to the rest of the covens, regather the covenant, maybe even the whole of the Order, and go to war."

I had picked an odd year to join the witches.

When we stopped for lunch, Araneigh and I went off a little way to eat by ourselves.

"I can't stop thinking about that monster," I told her while I cut a pear with my knife.

"What can't you stop thinking about?" she asked.

"One reason I wanted to be a witch is that I wanted to feel like I was a part of the world. Part of important events. Going to war against the blighters, that's important. Maybe even world-changing. But … then I think about yesterday. About the eye of the talik, looking up at me. At us."

"And?"

"And I don't know. I don't want to feel that way again. That panic and dread. It was awful. I was powerless. If we go to war against the blighters, I'm going to feel that way again."

“You weren’t powerless,” Araneigh said. “You saved us.”

“Yeah, but …” I started. I didn’t have a good way to finish that sentence.

“But nothing.” Araneigh took a slice of pear. “What would you rather do? Go home and run a stable? You can do that, but it’s not going to keep you safe. Maybe the blight will win, and the forests will die, and all the ley will be in the hands of a few people. You’d be powerless then. Or the Order will be outlawed for real, and someone will find out you were a whelp, and you’ll be powerless. Or just, I don’t know. Life will happen. A horse will fall on you, or whatever bad things happen at stables.”

“That’s different,” I protested.

“It’s not. There’s no escaping from life. Bad things are going to happen. Better to face them head on. Like how you handled the talik! I was so busy trying to figure out what my dad would do that I probably would have just drowned. But you? You stared at danger, and then you … you poked it in the eye! It was brilliant.”

“Thanks,” I said, blushing. She put her arm around my shoulder and I leaned against her.

“What would your dad have done?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Probably would have used some spell.”

“Did he ever teach you any magic?”

“Says he can’t. Says dryad magic won’t work for humans. He taught me lots of things, though.”

“Like what?”

“Listen for a moment,” she said, then was silent. I listened. I didn’t hear anything but the sounds of the forest.

“The birds say it’s going to rain,” she said. “We’d better get back to the coven.”

As we skirted the edge of the woods, we saw a farmer and her son with a mule-drawn cart piled high with baskets of turnips and cabbage and other goods on their way to market. Dam Lament said she was too tired to deal with people, so Dam Sorrel and I put on disguises—hers magic, mine mundane—and approached them to buy flour and vegetables. Since Dam Sorrel was in her forties, she was much more convincing as my mother than Dam Lament had been. I was sad to take my hair out of a crown braid and put it back into a topknot, but Sorrel promised she’d fix it immediately after.

The woman was as skittish as her mule, keeping one eye on the road behind us throughout the entire transaction. Sorrel didn’t tell her we were witches, but overpaid her nonetheless.

On the way back to our coven, each of us carrying a basket weighed down with food, Sorrel led us on a detour through a different part of the

woods.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I haven't been to this part of the world in thirty years," she said. "I want to see if something is still here."

"Everyone is waiting for us," I said. I was tired and hungry, and I'd never spent much time alone with Dam Sorrel before.

"And they'll wait a little longer."

The woods were thin here, almost a field rather than a forest, with a few ancient oaks here and there. One of them stood out, gray-barked and lit beautifully by the sun. The branches spread out wide, shading a vast swath of the forest floor.

"It's still here," Sorrel said quietly. "With all the blight, I'm glad to see this tree is still here, still alive."

"What is this place?"

"The last time I was here, I was an apprentice. It was late fall, and my coven was on its way to Endsmeet. One of the whelps and I had become close, and after dinner we wandered off by ourselves. We found this tree and camped beneath it."

"Okay," I said, though I didn't understand why Sorrel was telling me this. She rarely spoke at all, and when she did, she was usually a lot quicker to get to the point.

"That whelp … her name was Catkin. Dam Lament said you'd asked about her."

I was suddenly rapt.

"What was so special about her?" I asked.

Sorrel set down her basket and walked up to the tree. She placed her palms on the bark, breathing in its power.

"Catkin was special for a thousand reasons. She was driven, curious, talented. But also … Catkin was born a boy. She came to us as a boy, disguised as a girl."

I gasped, then covered my mouth. Dam Sorrel knew.

A thousand emotions and thoughts fought one another in my brain, and I couldn't begin to sort through them.

"You call her 'she'?" I asked, finally.

"She was always a girl, even when she was still a boy."

"I don't understand," I said.

Sorrel stepped away from the tree and walked back to where I stood. "To hear Catkin tell it, she was a girl trapped in a boy's body. She learned the witch's work as well as any girl before her. In that way, she was always a girl. But, later, we made her body match her spirit."

"What …" I asked, still refusing to admit that I knew that Sorrel knew about me, "what did that look like?"

“After we were both full witches, we spent years trying to find the spell she needed. We finally found it in a book in the dungeons of the Old King’s Keep, where King Sallow had kept a stable of imprisoned spellcasters of every order and tradition. It took us another year to gather all the components to the spell. Then, under the dead light of lunar eclipse, Dam Willow cut one bone out of each of our arms and put them in the other. Catkin woke up with her body transformed, and I woke up with the worst headache of my life.”

“You did that for her?” I asked.

“We were in love,” Sorrel said.

“Where is she now?” I asked.

“I wish I knew. She was working against the Duchess, got found out, and had to run. It’s been fifteen years now without a word. She could be dead, she could be in Metluria.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Sorrel picked up the basket of vegetables and started back toward the coven.

“Most of the Order had no problem with Catkin,” Sorrel said. “Even before she transformed. Someone like Catkin joining our ranks is rare, but it happens. But … the reason Catkin had to run was that another witch, a powerful crone named Dam Aster, sold her out. Dam Aster lived alone, on the north coast of Mother’s Bay. She didn’t approve of people she saw as men joining the witches. When she found out about Catkin, she went to Duchess Helte. Told her that Catkin was working against her.”

We walked in silence for a few minutes as I worked up the courage to say more.

“Who knows about me?”

“The coven,” she said. “And that’s it. Araneigh doesn’t know yet. When we pulled you out of the water yesterday, your dress was lifted and we saw.”

“What should I do?”

“Keep your secret safe as long as you can. I don’t know who you can and can’t trust in the Order. Dam Aster wasn’t the only one who felt that way.”

“What about that ritual?”

“I don’t know the spell,” Dam Sorrel said. “I think Catkin has the book. Dam Willow might still remember how to perform the ritual. And you’ll need someone willing to trade bones.”

“Where is Dam Aster now? How can I avoid her?” I asked.

For the first time in the whole telling of the story, Dam Sorrel smiled. “There are others like her, I’m certain. But Dam Aster? She’s chained to a rock at the bottom of Mother’s Bay. Right where I left her.”

FIFTEEN

Standing on its black sand beach, Lake Leur looked like I remembered it—huge and blue and beautiful. But it was different, somehow, as well. It wasn't just the wisps and traces of ley I caught moving over it in the starlight. It was the memory of what we'd done to Dam Heavens. And it was the fear—mine, and everyone else's. Fear tinted everything, like I was looking at the world through a stained-glass window.

We rejoined most of our covenant in a tiny fishing village called Set Harrow, on the opposite shore from where we'd burned Dam Heavens. Set Harrow was scarcely more than a homestead, and we outnumbered the villagers. The town was built next to a boat graveyard—every ship that had ever sailed the lake's waters was rusting or rotting in Set Harrow. Most were rowboats, but there were also sailboats scattered across the rocks and sand. Some were larger than any landlocked ship had any right to be, remnants from when the lake had filled the entire valley.

It wasn't the whole of our covenant. Several of the witches I knew by sight but not by name were missing.

I worried about what happened to the missing witches. But I also worried about who in the covenant would turn on me if they knew about me. It was a relief to have my secret out, at least to my coven. And oddly, it was a relief to know what I was facing. The Order of the Vine wasn't going to cast me out, and it wasn't going to burn me alive. I wasn't safe, but I also wasn't in the grave danger I had feared.

The villagers put us up in one of the largest of the beached ships to shelter us from the thunderstorms that swept across the lake almost every afternoon.

I went belowdecks, and Haim was braiding Henomi's hair, sitting atop a stool like it was her throne. Daidi was pacing, clutching her doll. It felt so familiar, so right, to be back with them, and I smiled. All three of them smiled back, even Daidi.

"Where's everyone else?" Araneigh asked. "I didn't see everyone."

“At least five witches are missing,” Haim said.

“Dead, you mean,” Daidi said. Her smile hadn’t lasted long.

“Missing,” Haim repeated. “Dam Ghin says they’re missing.”

“Dead.”

“I know you hate everyone,” Haim said, “but some of us are worried about our teachers and aren’t just going to give up on them like that. And Dam Ghin wouldn’t lie to us.”

“Dead,” Daidi said, but she said it quietly, and I realized she’d been crying. A fresh scar ran down her cheek and continued on her bare shoulder.

My homecoming no longer felt so joyous.

“How long have you all been here?” Araneigh asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

“A couple days,” Haim said. She finished braiding Henomi’s hair, tying it off with a piece of ribbon, and Araneigh sat down to have her hair braided next.

“My coven’s been here the whole time,” Daidi said. “Dam Yarrow got cut by a sword pretty bad, and Apprentice Gallina didn’t make it out of the circle at all. So we didn’t go far. We figured we could spy on the knights, bury Gallina, and see if we could get Yarrow to Dam Willow for healing.”

“How’d that go?” Araneigh asked.

“Bad,” Daidi said. “The knights found us, and two more witches died, and I got cut real deep, and the ten of us who were left ran away to here. The oldest people in town remember when they had a village witch and say they miss her being around, so they put us up. We’ve only been out at night since, until you showed up.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“It happens,” Daidi said, her voice monotone. “Worst part is, there’s not really any ley around here, just a little bit coming off the lake. Couldn’t do much to heal me, couldn’t do much to help anyone at all.”

“What about you?” I asked Haim.

“We went to my father’s house,” she said. “He hid us in the guest wing.”

I stared, confused.

“Her dad’s Baron Silhin,” Daidi explained. “Meet Haim of Silhin.”

“Haim of the Vine, now, thank you,” Haim said.

“Why would …” I started to ask.

“Fifth daughter of the fifth son goes to the witches,” Haim said. “True for a peasant, true for a king.”

“I’ve never heard that rule,” I said.

“Well, my father had,” Haim said. “I’m glad he had, what’s more.”

Then she paused, cleared her throat. “We got a lot done. A lot of research. Dam Ghin put ciphers into the clouds. Got in touch with the rest of the Order, let them know what we’d figured out.”

“Where is the rest of the Order?” I asked.

“Turns out, the blight is spreading across the whole kingdom,” Haim said. “Not just the duchy. Other covenants are following up on other leads. At least, that’s what Dam Ghin says.”

“Dam Ghin Dam Ghin Dam Ghin!” Daidi shouted. “To rot with Dam Ghin.”

“She’s really wise, though,” Haim mumbled, looking down at her hands.

I wanted to figure out some way to get everyone talking nice to one another, but I hadn’t the slightest idea how.

“What about you?” Daidi asked me.

“We ran away from knights for a month, then we found a worson, then Dam Lament used its quills to protect herself long enough to kill a talik.”

“Lorel poked it in the eye first, though,” Araneigh said. “Just jumped in the water and jabbed the talik in the eye with her nails.”

“Whoa,” Haim said.

I blushed.

“That’s what brought us here, isn’t it?” Haim asked. “The talik, it told us to come here?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t wait till we know magic,” Haim said.

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you learn magic?” I asked. “Each of you.”

“I’m going to make trees grow everywhere I can,” Haim said.

Daidi laughed mockingly.

“What about you?” I asked her.

“Kill Haim’s trees,” she said. “Not with blight. Just fire.”

I’d asked because I wanted everyone to be friendly. It clearly wasn’t working.

“What about you, Lorel?” Daidi asked. “Flowers and sunshine and making everyone happy all the time?”

I was going to turn myself into a girl. But I couldn’t tell them that. And I didn’t want to lie.

“Make myself pretty,” I said.

“To rot with pretty,” Daidi answered, like I figured she would.

“Araneigh?” Henomi asked quietly. “What are you going to do?”

“Trees,” Araneigh said. “I’m with Haim on the trees.”

The five of us talked the rest of the day, almost like friends. Even though Daidi cut in with cruelty and laughter every chance she could, I

think she was happy to see us. Maybe that shouldn't have mattered so much to me, but it did. She'd had a worse time than any of us, and it wasn't fair. The world wasn't fair, to be sure, but believing that the world wasn't fair always seemed like a terrible excuse for never trying to make anything better.

Flowers and sunshine and making everyone happy. That seemed like a good use for magic.

The Wanderer was an old mountain, a mountain whose jagged edges had been worn down by the rains of millennia. Its trees were pine and oak, cut through with poison ivy and brambles and flowers.

We ate dinner in the mountain's long shadow, sheltered between the two largest wrecked ships. We had no fire, lest we draw attention to ourselves. We had no bread, because there was no flour. Our reunion dinner had stew, and it had worry, but it didn't have much in the way of joy.

The witches talked for hours, and all the bad news was confirmed: blight was spreading across the whole of Cekon, and with it, the hatred of witches. Solo practitioners everywhere were joining covens and covenants for protection or else moving further into the woods, mountains, and swamps, away from prying eyes and vengeful blades. The one lead was what Dam Lament had given her eye to learn—that there was something under the mountain.

The witches around me were worried, there was no doubt about that. Dam Lament would die before she'd admit fear, but she showed it in her usual way: a scowl. Dam Rose and Dam Sorrel were less afraid to let their emotions show, and they both wept openly and let the women around them support them.

I'd always assumed I wanted to be like Dam Lament, dependable and tough. I was already plenty good at hiding my emotions, even from myself. Maybe I had more to learn from Sorrel and Rose.

Even Dam Alectoria was afraid, but she carried determination in her voice when she spoke. Like my mother always told me, bravery isn't the absence of fear, but the presence of courage.

It was Dam Ghin, though, who said the final piece of the night. She was an elder, a crone, but her voice didn't carry the weight of the decades like those of the other crones I had met. Her voice was soft, her words considered, like each one was almost too valuable to let leave her lips.

"Do not lose hope, sisters," she said, her eyes twinkling like the stars above. "We know where they are. We are witches of the Order of the Vine. Our Order has existed since time before memory, and if we don't stop the blighters, whoever they are, then we'll be the last of us. Only some corruption of our magic will remain. I do not fear my own death,

but I will not allow the death of the Order. Tonight, we'll end this."

After Dam Ghin spoke, Dam Rose led us back to the ship.

"Stay inside, no matter what you hear tonight," she said while we all stood on deck. "Don't let anyone in who isn't from our covenant, no matter who they are, no matter what they say."

"What's happening?" Haim asked.

"Get some rest," Dam Rose answered.

"We can help," I said. "Whatever you're doing, we can help."

Dam Rose shook her head sadly, then turned and walked away. She climbed down over the side of the ship and was gone.

"Well, to rot with that," Araneigh said. She stood next to the guardrail and squinted. "They're going up the mountain."

I walked up next to her and looked. Black silhouettes moved among the trees, climbing steep paths. Steel glinted off the weapons of the witches. There was so little ley here, they'd need those weapons.

"That doesn't make sense," Daidi said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"From what you told me, they're looking for something at the root of the mountain."

"They saw a blighter camp," I said. "I heard Dam Lament say so."

"Maybe," Daidi said. "But there are cave mouths down here, and half the cave was carved out by giants. An old fisherman told me about it, told me never to wander alone in the woods at night, because the white worms crawl out from the cave mouths and steal children. Make them work the old giant's mines and then eat them. I found a few of the caves, but never went in."

"White worms?" Henomi asked.

"There're no white wyrms anymore," Araneigh said. "And it's wyrms, with a y. Beasts that look like dragons, not slimy things that crawl in the ground. My father told me so, and he would know."

Daidi turned to Henomi to answer her. "The white worms, wyrms, whatever, the fisherman says they crawl on ten legs, and they're as big as a wolf, and they have translucent scales. They see as much with the antennae all over their bodies as they do with their eyes."

"Yeah, yeah," Haim said, "and they talk in riddles, and their nests are made of bones, and come on, if they were real, we'd know it. How long did the fisherman claim it had been since anyone saw one?"

"When he was a boy," Daidi said, "his friend got taken by one."

"When he was a boy," Haim said, "his friend ran away from home, because look at this place!"

"They used to be real," Araneigh said. "My father told me. And if there are blighters under the mountain, maybe there are wyrms too. But they

don't matter. What matters is that there are blighters, we have to do something about them."

"No, we don't," Haim said. "The witches are dealing with it."

"So what?" Daidi asked, moving over to stand next to Araneigh. "We're witches too. This is our chance to prove that to ourselves and to the dams. I know the way."

"If the witches know the blighters are headquartered at the root of the mountain," Haim said, "and they're confronting them atop the mountain, there's a reason for it."

"We'll just scout out the caves, be real quiet," Araneigh said. "Then when the witches come back in the morning empty-handed, we can tell them what we've figured out."

"I don't know," I said.

"It won't be as simple as that," Haim said.

"Yeah," Henomi said. "It's a stupid plan. But I'm still going."

"Why?" Haim asked.

"Having each other's backs right now is more important than being right or safe," Henomi answered.

"Can't argue with that," Daidi said.

"I could," Haim said. "What about you, Lorel?"

"Henomi's right," I said. My voice shook a little as I said it. "I don't like the idea at all, if I'm being honest. But Dam Fia told me something once. She said that anything a coven does, it is as though it has been done by every member of that coven. Or something like that. I think she said it better. I wish I could ask her, but I can't, because she's dead, she was killed by a blighter. And our covens are doing something. Which means we do it too."

"If we can help, we have to," Henomi said. "The Great Mother asks that of us."

"Oh, good, let's get ourselves killed," Haim grumbled. Still, she went belowdecks and came back with a lantern and an axe.

→ SIXTEEN ←

We scoured the woods for almost an hour before we found a cave mouth, a single crack, waist-high, cut into a wall of limestone that glistened with falling water.

"We're doing this?" I asked.

"We're doing this," Henomi agreed. Her bravery was infectious.

I got onto my hands and knees and crawled into the cave. It was so narrow I had to hold the lantern ahead of me, not at my side, so I couldn't see much of anything.

The tunnel opened up after a couple dozen yards, and I stood up and gaped at my surroundings. I was so taken by the beauty of the cave that I didn't notice the other whelps until they were standing next to me.

"Would you look at that?" Haim asked.

I was looking.

There were several cave systems near Ledston that Lane and I had explored as children. Every one was different, but they were different like eyes were different from person to person. This one was as different from those as a pond was to the ocean: different not only in scale, but in form and power.

Crystals shone on every bit of the cathedral-sized room we'd entered, every stalagmite and stalactite, every crevice and cranny and crawlspace. My lantern caught on a million prisms, and color washed over the place, bright and proud. The ceiling was lost somewhere in the reflected light above us, and for a moment I lost all sense of direction, any idea of up and down.

I sat on a natural ledge of bright stone and tried to collect myself. Haim stood over me, still gazing with mouth and eyes wide open.

The silence of the cave was punctuated by the distant slow drip of water, a scurrying and scraping that left me uneasy, and occasional far-off voices. I couldn't make out words, but I could tell they carried fear.

The others heard the voices too, and we set off to the far end of the

hall. Twice, I nearly stepped into a hole. Once I caught myself; once Araneigh caught me by the collar of my dress and saved me from sliding down into the rainbow light.

The voices got no louder, no more distinct, and I couldn't tell which of the dozens or hundreds of tunnels they might be coming from.

"What do we do?" Haim asked when we reached the far end of the hall.

"We'll just figure out where the voices are coming from, that's all," I said. "Then we can go back."

"How, though?" Henomi asked.

"We follow the ley," I answered, "if there is any."

"What?" Haim asked.

"That makes sense," Araneigh said. "If I was a blighter, I'd go where the ley flows to, to suck it up."

"We can't see ley," Haim said.

"Lorel and I can," Araneigh answered.

It was too bright. We shuttered our lanterns and in an instant, the darkness was absolute.

"Hey!" Henomi yelped, terror in her voice.

"It's okay," I said. "It's easier to see it in the …"

I saw it. A thick, dim band of purple snaked across my vision, pulsing with blue. As soon as I focused my eyes on it, it went away, of course. But it didn't take long to find it again. It didn't illuminate at all. Light that didn't illuminate.

Purple is a color of ill fortune, I remembered. Useful for cursing your enemies.

I unhooded the lantern and lost the ley current, but it didn't matter. I remembered its path: it had come down through the roof and disappeared into a crevasse in the wall.

"Come on," I said, "this way."

We made our way deeper into the cave, stopping every few minutes to block the light and see the way again. Not every room was as magnificent as the first chamber, but each had its own beauty.

Most importantly, the voices grew louder. After walking for a long time, we could find our way purely from sound. The voices were clearer now. The scraping, scratching, and scuttling were clearer too.

We stood in a passage too narrow to walk two abreast, ankle-deep in snow-cold water, staring into a crawlspace set into the wall at waist height that angled sharply down into the rock.

The noises were coming from that hole, loud now that we were close.

"Found what we needed," Henomi said. "Time to go back."

"Sure," Araneigh said. "I'm going to take a look first, though."

With that, she climbed up to the hole and disappeared through it. Daidi went next, then Haim.

"Don't leave me," Henomi said to me.

"Sure," I said. "They'll be right back." I wasn't confident, though. I was just pretending to be. Henomi had bolstered my strength, it was time to bolster hers.

Long moments went by. Then the noises grew quiet.

"Help us!" I heard through the hole. I couldn't figure out whose voice it was.

"Don't!" another voice rang out. This one sounded like Araneigh. "Get the witches, get the crones, get the Order! But don't come alone!"

"No more witches, no more crones," the first voice responded, singing, "come alone, come alone."

"Oh, to the fires with this," I said.

Henomi looked at me and nodded. "Okay," she said. "Okay."

I took three deep breaths to steel my nerve, then crawled into what I assumed to be a trap, deep under the mountain. Henomi followed after.

The rock of the cave walls was tight around me, cutting into my skin, but I kept going. At first I was on my hands and knees, but soon I was on my belly. Then the floor beneath me went smooth, and the walls went smooth, and I barreled down into the darkness. I couldn't help it: I screamed.

My lantern fell free from my hand and disappeared ahead of me, leaving me in the dark as I slid and fell. Terror cut through me, worse than I'd ever felt.

Then there was no floor underneath me. I was falling. I only just had the presence of mind to get my hands out in front of me before my body crashed into rock. Pain ran through my veins, pushing out even the fear. Henomi tumbled out shortly after, still cradling her lantern.

I blinked and opened my eyes. I could see, though barely, by the dim light of Henomi's lantern. We'd fallen more than twenty feet onto a midden of bones and fur. Most were animal bones—bats and rats, the skull of a wolf—but I saw a fractured human skull amid the rest.

The walls were not crystalline, not anymore. They were black rock, black glass. Half basalt, half obsidian. Some of the walls were natural, some seemed to have been shaped by hand.

Araneigh, Haim, and Daidi stood nearby, and in front of them, what could only be a white wyrm skittered a semicircle back and forth. More a centipede than a dragon, it looked at me with saucer-sized white eyes. Even as it paced the width of the cave, circling us, its eyes stayed fixed on me. Four more of them skittered through the hall. They were, indeed, as tall as wolves. But they were as long as horses.

Of everything I'd seen in my life, only the helgirden felt so alien as these creatures. They seemed to belong to a different world.

"Let us out, little girls, let us out," the wyrm in front of me said.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"We are hungry, let us out," it began to sing. "We will eat you, or you'll let us out."

"We want moon on our bodies, let us out," the other wyrms sang in chorus.

"There's a door," Araneigh explained, shouting to be heard over the song. "At the far end of the hall. They're trapped in here, because they don't have hands. They'll eat us if we don't let them out. If we let them out, they'll eat everyone in town."

"All but the girls," the first wyrm answered. "All but the little, all but the little, all but you little little girls."

"No," I said.

"Then your bones will fill the pile, stack the pile, then your bones will lie yellow and white, in the dark forever."

"You aren't going to kill us, since we're your only chance of escape."

"You talk so much, little boy, little girl. I will eat your friends, eat your friends, eat everyone but you, little boy, little girl."

The wyrms knew what I was. I looked down at my dress, afraid that the fall had ripped it, but it was intact.

"I'm a very stubborn girl," I said. "If you eat my friends, I'll die in the dark before I let you out. But let's make a deal. Someone trapped you here, yes? Closed you into this room, and you've been living off of whatever finds its way into your trap?"

"Not long, not long," the wyrm in front of me said, never stopping moving, "not for the length of an age, less than the age of a girl, a boy."

"We'll let you out if you agree not to eat us, or the witches, or any of the people from the town."

"Not eat them today," the wyrm replied.

"Not ever," I corrected.

"We agree, we agree, whatever it takes, we agree," the wyrm sang.

"We can't trust them!" Araneigh shouted.

"You can't trust us," the wyrm agreed.

"We don't have a choice," I countered.

"We could wait until dawn, when the Order comes to find us," Daidi said.

"So hungry before the dawn, so hungry," the wyrm said.

"We could kill them," Haim said, her axe held at her side.

"Yes, yes, listen to the girl, fight us, blood for blood, limb for limb, nail for nail. We are hungry."

“We agree,” I said. “Let us go, and we’ll let you out.”

“No tricks, no traps?”

“No tricks, no traps,” I said.

The wyrms herded us to the end of the hall. Henomi held her lantern aloft and it illuminated a stone door. Based on the deep gouges in the basalt, it was clear that the wyrms had been trying to escape, and obvious that they were immensely powerful. A brass knob protruded from the center of the door.

The five of us circled up and I whispered my plan one by one in everyone’s ear. No one liked it, that was clear. I didn’t like it either. But one after another, my friends nodded.

“There is time, is time, is time for waiting only if for eating,” a wyrm announced. “Not for planning, not for tricks. We have tricks, you have tricks.”

Haim went to the knob and tried to turn it. It wouldn’t budge. She put a second hand over her first hand, braced herself against the ground, and tried again. It turned. Somewhere inside the wall, a latch came free. She pushed, and the door swung open a crack.

“Go!” Haim shouted, and we ran past her through the door into a bright hall beyond, man-made and immense, lit by some unseen rainbow.

Haim tried to slam the door shut. One wyrm skittered through before she succeeded.

“Betrayers, misleaders, misbehavers!” it shouted and reared up onto its back legs, its forelegs like sickles aimed at my chest. Then it lunged at me.

Haim and Henomi slammed into it from the side, armed only with their hands and the weight of their bodies. The creature staggered but didn’t fall.

I dodged out of the way as it crashed down, its legs gouging the stone of the floor.

The two of them pinned the wyrm’s back half to the ground, but its front still flailed and thrashed, the sharp antennae that covered its body whipping through the air. Araneigh came at it from the side, swinging an axe that scraped harmlessly across its armored back. The creature turned toward Araneigh, lashing out. A leg speared her arm, and blood shot out of the wound.

She might have screamed. I saw her mouth open, but I couldn’t hear anything anymore. Just blood. Just adrenaline.

I rushed the wyrm’s face and swung my fist at its eye. It moved, and I hit a scaled jaw, doing more damage to my hand than the creature.

“All of you dead, all you girls, the boy and the girls,” it hissed, struggling to keep its voice.

Haim slammed her axe down across the top of its head. The blow still

didn't break skin, but it did smash the creature's head into the stone.

I kicked and heard teeth crack, but it caught the toe of my boot in its jaw. I kicked with my other foot, but couldn't get purchase.

It pulled back and I fell to the ground. I saw that huge mouth open again, ready to bite down on my foot or my leg, ready to eat me. Ready to end me.

Henomi pulled the beast backwards with all her strength, and the wyrm's jaw clamped down on air. I was free.

Haim slammed her axe down on its face, again, again. It turned its malice on her.

Araneigh lay next to me, holding pressure on her arm as blood oozed through her fingers. She was out of the fight. I took the axe from her.

The wyrm opened its mouth and snapped at Haim. I struck where its jaws met and cut deep, and the monster screamed loud enough, inhuman enough, for me to hear it through the tunnel vision of battle.

Henomi broke one of its legs, then another. Haim struck blow after blow against the thing's face, bludgeoning it with her axe.

It writhed and wriggled and thrashed, and I saw more blood, someone's blood. I pushed the blade of the axe up under the large scales on its neck and pressed, cutting into its soft skin.

Finally, it died. No last words, just a whimper like a wounded dog.

I'd never killed anything before, let alone anything that could whimper. Let alone anything that could speak.

My hand was probably broken. Araneigh was losing a lot of blood from her arm, and Henomi had a nasty puncture in her thigh. All of us were covered with tiny cuts from the antennae. Daidi cut and ripped at the hem of her dress and got off two long strips. She handed one to me, then started dressing Henomi's leg. I tied the bandage around Araneigh's arm as best I could with only one working hand—it didn't stop the bleeding, but it slowed it down. They both needed more care, especially Henomi.

Behind the door, the other wyrms howled.

Once the most immediate crisis was over, I leaned against the wall, fighting for breath. Araneigh took my hand and collapsed into me, letting me hold her. I'd nearly died. We'd all nearly died.

"We need to go," Haim said. She was right, but I didn't want to listen to her.

"Haim is right," Araneigh said, offering me a hand up even though she was more hurt than I was. "Something—someone—put those things in there. They might have heard us."

I was in too much shock to see ley, but Araneigh managed and we followed an invisible stream of purple and white through the dungeon. Every hall was narrow and high, carved from crystalline stone. Every

room was a cathedral. All of it was lit by a sourceless glow that cycled through every color.

The light felt familiar, but I couldn't place it until we entered the largest room of all, with a ceiling so high I thought for a moment we had made it out into the open air. A single natural column cut through the center of the room, holding up the roof. A golden cage sat at its base. Two more sat high up in alcoves carved into its sides. Each held a bright, radiant sapling, growing from a skull.

"By the Lords," Daidi said, stopping in front of the column to stare.

I stared too, mesmerized by the color, the power. The light of the saplings flickered like that of a candle in the wind. Someone was drawing their energy. The blighters, somewhere, were doing something.

"We've got to get out of here," Haim said.

"Sure," Daidi agreed. She grabbed the cage from the floor, the smallest one. Haim cast a disapproving glance at her, but the rest of us were too focused on escape to weigh in on her theft. With her good arm, Araneigh pointed to a door on the other side of the hall, and we hurried toward it.

We passed through two small rooms and one grand hall. After another few hundred yards, we stepped outside through an entrance well concealed behind a shelf of rock.

The sun was rising, gloom turning into day.

Nearby, we heard the sounds of battle.

SEVENTEEN

We raced through the trees toward the clamor. I was beyond fear, beyond exhaustion, though I still felt the searing pain in my hand.

At the tree line, we hid behind a thick copse of young pines and peered out at the fray. Witches from the Order faced off against a group in gray robes, what I could only assume to be blighters. I'd thought blighters were witches turned bad, like Dam Heavens, but more than half of this group were men, and I didn't recognize any of them. It was a relief, in its way, to realize Dam Heavens might have been an exception.

The two groups stood ten, maybe twenty paces apart, facing off in a battle of spellcraft. I'd never seen anything like it. Witch magic is rarely showy. But the blighters threw balls of black fire and streams of icy blue. They called down lightning from the dark clouds above.

The blighters' magic broke with claps of thunder and blasts of fire against some invisible shield that guarded the Order. Alectoria, Ilma, and other crones shook with exertion. I couldn't hear them over the roar of fire and thunder, but I could see their mouths, and I knew they were singing.

The blighters were outnumbered, but they were winning. There was scarcely any ley here.

One witch—maybe Rose, it was hard to tell at this distance—threw a spear. The steel and wood splintered where lightning struck it down.

"Daidi, can you get the wounded to safety?" Haim asked.

"You do it," Daidi said. "You can carry them, I can't." She handed the golden cage to Haim. "This has got to have a limit on its range, on how far away from it they can draw power. Walk until it stops flickering." Haim looked uncertain, then nodded and took it.

I realized I didn't want Araneigh to leave, suddenly thinking this might be the last time I saw her. She squeezed my hand, then Haim helped her and Henomi limp away from the battle, along the beach toward the farthest rotting hulks on the shore. The ships might be an okay place to

hide if the blighters broke through the ranks of the witches.

Which, turning my attention back to the battle, seemed like it might happen.

"We've got to help," Daidi said. "Maybe we can sneak around behind the blighters, and attack them from there."

Lament was skulking behind the rest of the Order, pacing, watching, planning something. I crouched down and ran to her, staying behind the cover of trees as much as I could.

"Dam Lament!" I whisper-shouted when I was close.

"Whelp, get out of here!"

"We found the cages. We found their power. Come with us."

Lament turned back to the battle and walked into the thick of the witches, then came back with Dam Rose.

"Show her," Lament said. "She's studied those damned things more than me."

As we fled back into the trees, I took one last look at the battle and saw Lament charging forward with a spear. She leaped over something on the ground, something that looked like a body.

On our way, we told Dam Rose what we knew about the cages and the wyrms. When we reached the hall of cages, the remaining two were flickering faster. We had to hurry.

"Can we use them?" Daidi asked.

"Destroy them," Rose said. "We destroyed that first cage. Bent open the bars, pulled out the sapling. It turned black and dead in my hands."

It was bizarre to realize that the most magical things in this world are also, at their heart, mundane and fragile. That a magical sapling can simply be uprooted. That a witch will die with a sword in her chest the same as anyone.

Whoever had carved out the alcoves had also carved steps into the column. They were narrow and oddly placed, but they would have to do. I started up the stairs. As I climbed toward the two cages, forty feet in the air, fear finally crept in.

I laughed kind of maniacally. Turns out I have a witch's cackle after all, so long as I'm terrified. I laughed because, out of all of the terrible things that had happened in the past few hours, the thing I was apparently most afraid of was heights.

I knocked the first cage off its ledge with my good hand. It clattered terribly against the stone as it landed. Daidi and Rose pried open its bars.

I couldn't believe I was climbing a column in a cave beneath a mountain while witches fought against blighters and knights hunted all of us. Some part of me felt like I should never have left Ledston, but some part of me was ecstatic, alive with the adrenaline surging through my

body.

I kept climbing, pushing down my fear and clinging to the stone of the column, and finally neared the second cage. As I reached for it, a man in a simple gray tunic ran into the room, his hands raised high. Black lightning arced between his fingertips.

Dam Rose didn't hesitate. She didn't try to talk to him. She ran forward and thrust her spear into the man's belly. Then she pulled the blade out and thrust it into his throat.

Somehow, the man continued forward, stopping only when he hit the crossbars of Rose's boar spear. Still, he waved his hands, building power in the air.

"The cage!" Daidi yelled.

The sapling inside the cage pulsed black like the blighter's lightning. Teetering on the narrow foothold, I held on to the cage with my broken hand as best I could, the pain shooting through my body, and slipped my other hand through the wide-set bars. The skull was old and brittle, bleached white by the sun. I grasped the stalk of the sapling and ripped it out. It broke apart like charcoal in my hands.

Down below, the man crumpled and died, same as the plant.

I was shocked, and my foot slipped. Only by throwing my whole body forward and clawing at the alcove did I manage to keep from falling. My injured hand hurt like fire, and I could barely grasp the rock ledge.

"Thank the Nether," Dam Rose said, pulling her spear free.

I slowly climbed down, and as the blood pounding in my ears slowed, I noticed a change in the air of the room. I let my eyes drift out of focus, and I saw it: ley. An endless eddy of gathered ley, every color mixed together in a gaudy tapestry of power. It was free.

Daidi stared all around her. She could see it. She was seeing ley for the first time.

"I've never killed anyone before," Dam Rose said, as much to herself as to us, as she wiped her spear clean of blood on the dead man's robes. "I don't think I like it."

I stared at the dead man, the pool of blood surrounding him. I was alive. He was not. Maybe, in the end, that was what mattered.

At Dam Rose's insistence, we searched the halls for any clues about the blighters. It seemed clear that they'd only moved in recently, as they had no furniture in their sleeping quarters just off the main hall. The rest of the complex was dusty and full of undisturbed rubble, except for one room, a ritual room, near where the wyrms were trapped. Someone had carved a triangle inside a circle into the floor, and there were deep gouges that looked like claw marks in the stone floor inside the circle.

"Summoning," Dam Rose said without even inspecting closely. "In the

witch's style."

"They *brought* the white wyrms here?" I asked. "From the Nethers, like the helgirden?"

"Not from the Nethers. From somewhere else in the world. Wherever there are still wyrms, maybe some cavern far below the surface of the earth. Being summoned hurts more than being flayed alive, as I've heard it, and it takes so much power that there are only a few places in the world and just a few times of the year that you can do it. We did it at Endsmeet once, two years ago. We summoned a man who had hurt one of us."

"Whatever the reason they summoned the wyrms, it can't be good," I said.

"They're gathering power," Dam Rose said. "Every kind of power they can find."

We started back toward the main hall.

"Giants built this?" I asked.

"I don't know," Rose said.

"Children built it," Daidi said. "The giants used to capture children, make them work. Maybe children carved this out. Centuries ago."

"Doesn't matter," Dam Rose said. "We just need to figure out everything we can about the blighters."

We ducked back into the sleeping quarters to find whatever we could. They didn't own much, no more than a witch might. Scattered around the room, we found a dozen backpack baskets, a couple dozen sleeping pads, worn clothing in shades of gray, plus a few garments here and there that were brighter and more finely woven.

The people who had worn those clothes had been alive recently. As we picked through their belongings, I couldn't stop thinking that I was robbing graves. Moreover, I was robbing the graves of people my friends were currently killing nearby, now that we'd destroyed the source of their power.

That feeling got worse when I found a notebook filled with charts, written in a bold, smooth hand. It was written in some language I couldn't understand. Still, a person had written it.

"It's a logbook," Daidi said, looking over my shoulder. "My aunt had books like this."

"I can't make any sense of it," I said.

"Well, you can a little," Daidi said. She pointed at the charts. "Every row is probably a specific transaction, or maybe a date, or a range of dates. Then the left column here, that's probably items coming in. On the right, items going out."

"More is coming in than going out," I said. "It's got to be the sapling

cages. Or blighters themselves, maybe."

"So this was a storehouse," Rose said. "That's good, then. Maybe we destroyed most of the blighters' power all in one go."

"I don't think so," Daidi said, flipping to the last page with writing on it. "There's a lot in the righthand column here. If our theory is right, a lot of those cages just left, probably right before we got here."

"Oh, Nethers," Dam Rose said, rubbing her temples with her fingertips. Blood from the man she'd just killed smeared across her forehead. She took a deep breath to collect herself. "Well, we've beat them once. We can beat them again."

EIGHTEEN

Most of the covenant gathered on the black sands of the lake shore, a few miles from town. The cruel light of dawn showed too few of us. Two or three witches were off scouting, but one, Dam Ghin, lay dead in the sand. Her blood was blue in her veins. Her eyes, visible through her uncanny clear eyelids, gazed ahead, lifeless.

Of the witches who remained, most had changed. Without ley available, they must have drawn from their own reserves, and they were transformed. One woman's skin had turned crimson, two ram horns sprouting from behind her ears. I recognized Dam Ilma only by her size and the look of power in her eyes—her hands had transformed into claws, feathers grew from her shoulders, and everything about her body had just … shifted.

Even if I lived to be old, as likely as not, I would end up a monster. That wouldn't have scared me a month before, but back then, I hadn't realized I could become a girl. Maybe it was better to be a monster than a boy.

The other whelps were there, and none of them were wounded anymore. Araneigh's arm was bare and unscarred. Despite the lack of ley, the witches must have healed the whelps.

Haim stood over Dam Ghin's corpse, tears streaming down her face.

Six witches, young and strong, lifted the dead crone. Dam Alectoria stood at their head, scattering leaves as she walked, and all seven walked out onto the lake, stepping gingerly on the surface of the water as though onto glass.

They sang as they walked, and the red light came over us. The song was mournful, the death cry of foxes. The rest of the Order walked out onto the lake, and Dam Rose herded us too, and we walked on water.

The atonal song ebbed and flowed as more singers joined in for parts and left for others. We walked until I saw nothing of the shore. The song ended, but still we stood on the water.

“Death is the balance of life,” a crone from another coven said. “Without death, there is no birth. Without death, there would be none of us.”

“None of us,” the witches repeated.

“We are made of earth and water. To earth, to water, we all return.”

With that, the witches set Dam Ghin’s body on the surface of the lake. It floated for just a moment, then sank into the dark.

We turned back to the shore in silence. Haim let out a wrenching sob. Henomi took one of her hands, Daidi the other, and the three walked across the water together. Araneigh walked after them.

I was alone as we walked back to shore, but that felt right somehow. Dam Ghin fell into the water alone. All of us are alone while we’re alive, sometimes, and then we’re alone forever.

Or maybe I was still just doing a bad job of feeling my emotions.

The villagers told us we could stay for another day, but they wanted us gone by the next sunrise. We’d rooted out the blighters—killed them, actually—and probably saved their village, but honestly, I couldn’t blame them. If I wasn’t so dead set on learning witchcraft myself, the sight of that battle would have convinced me I wanted nothing to do with the Order.

None of us had slept, but Dam Lament handed out spear-length sticks and made us train regardless.

“We killed a white wyrm last night!” I complained.

“And how was that?” she asked.

“Terrifying. I don’t want to think about weapons or fighting for at least a day.”

“That’s why you’re going to practice,” she said. “You can’t let that fear take root or you’ll wind up afraid to fight forever.” She didn’t look smug about it. Her one remaining eye was inscrutable with its star-shaped pupil, but everything else about her showed her exhaustion. She needed sleep as badly as we did.

So we fought each other on the black sands. Once, knocked to the ground, a spear poised over me, I flashed back to the vicious open jaws of the creature we’d killed. I didn’t snap out of it soon enough to roll away, and the wooden spear found my throat no problem. I started crying. Dam Lament didn’t excuse me from practice for a little thing like crying, and my eyes dried during the next fight.

Lunch that day was a feast, by our standards. We had fish and fowl, fresh bread and fruit and pastries, all given to us by the villagers as a show of gratitude.

I couldn’t handle being around people. Henomi and Haim were laughing about something. The crones acted like nothing had happened.

But we had killed people, or helped others do so. The wyrm had spoken to us, and we'd killed it. It didn't feel right.

I took my food and went down to the beach, looking for a place to be alone. I saw a fallen log, bleached white by the sun, behind some boulders and went to hide behind it.

Daidi was there. I hadn't even noticed she wasn't at lunch.

"Sorry," I mumbled, and turned away.

"Sit down," she said. I did.

"You going to eat anything?" I asked.

"Can't stand to be around everyone," she answered. "What about you? Can't handle all the happiness either?"

"Why isn't anyone talking about what happened?" I asked.

"That's the way of it with people. If they can forget everything and everyone that's inconvenient, they'll do it."

I wanted to disagree with her, but I couldn't collect my thoughts. Instead, I watched the tiny windblown waves lap at the shore.

"I don't know why I don't like you," Daidi said. "You seem nice enough. I just don't. There's something about you, and I can't put my finger on it, and I think I don't like you because I don't understand you. The rest of the whelps, I know why I don't like them. Haim is bossy and spoiled. Henomi just follows her around without thinking for herself. Araneigh thinks she's better than everyone, and even if it's true, it's not nice. You, though, I can't figure it out. I thought maybe it was because you kiss up to the witches, especially Lament, but I don't think that's it. It's something else."

"Why are you talking to me, then, if you don't like me?"

"It's not like that," Daidi said. "I don't like anyone. I don't like people. Boys especially. I figured I'd join the witches and only be around girls and it would be better, but it turns out girls are barely better."

She didn't like me because I was a boy. She just didn't know it.

"I need to get over it," she continued. "We're caught up in this big, Nether-loving great bit of evil, and the Order is the team I'm on in some stupid three-way fight with the knights and blighters."

She turned to me and smiled, a big fake smile that didn't extend to her eyes.

"Put on a good face. Stick with my team. Learn magic, keep myself alive. Keep you alive. Keep the forest alive. How do I do that? How do I make friends?"

"You're asking the wrong girl," I said. I called myself a girl without thinking about it. A warm glow flooded through me when I did it.

"You're stupid," she said. She said it like she wasn't sure she meant it, like she was just saying it to get a reaction out of me. "Everyone likes you

fine, and here you are moping. Stupid."

"Oh, the Nether take you," I snapped. I couldn't help myself—she wanted to get a rise out of me, and it worked. "You want to lash out at everyone? I've got feelings, the same as you. Hex was cruel to me. Hex hurt me. Hex took her problems out on me. I forgive her, but just barely. But you? You just don't know when to stop. You don't know how to leave other people alone, how to give other people a chance to forgive you."

Daidi dropped her fake smile and anger flashed across her face. "I won't need your forgiveness when I learn magic," she said, her voice sickly sweet.

I set my plate of food on the ground, stood up, and stormed off.

NINETEEN

I needed someone to talk to. I wanted Araneigh. I missed feeling close with her. But she was with the rest of the whelps, laughing in the shadow of one of the hulks. Joyful shouts were more than I could handle, so I kept walking.

I thought maybe Lament would listen to me, so long as I didn't talk about the other whelps, and I went off in search of her. None of the witches from my coven were in any of the boats, but I saw a spear propped up against a tree at the edge of the forest and approached.

The witches of my coven were gathered, sitting in a clump. I'd never seen them so informal—Ilma leaning against Alectoria, Sorrel brushing Lament's hair, Rose lying with her feet propped up on Lament's lap. They were just being women instead of war-weary witches.

They passed around a gourd of wine with turquoise ley pouring off it, so thick that I could see it in the daylight. They were relaxing. They were drunk. They also hadn't seen me yet.

"He can see ley, can't he?" Alectoria said. "He'll make a witch yet."

"It's just not the way it's supposed to be," Ilma drawled, her head against a tree. I wasn't used to her as a … a what, a harpy?

They were talking about me.

"To rot with you, Dam Ilma," Dam Sorrel growled, completely out of character.

"This isn't about Dam Catkin," Ilma said.

"How could it not be about Dam Catkin? She was a boy. Lorel is a boy."

"Dam Catkin," Dam Ilma said, "rest her soul, went out of balance when she became a woman. What's done is done, but there's no escaping that."

"Out of balance?" Dam Sorrel asked, standing up to her full height and not hiding the wrath in her voice. I was used to her being mild, almost meek. But she wasn't small, and she knew how to carry herself when she had to. "Out of balance? My lover is gone to Mother knows where, and all

I've got to remind me of her is a humerus in my arm. Out of balance?"

"Everyone, calm down," Dam Lament said.

"Don't tell me to calm down," Dam Sorrel snapped.

"I said everyone, and I meant everyone," Dam Lament said. "Ilma, are you going to apologize?"

"I'm not a child," the crone said.

"Then don't act like one."

"I'm not saying we should kick him out," Dam Ilma said. "I'm just saying that it's not right. And don't you all team up on me about this—we all know that had we known, we never would have initiated him into the Order."

"Speak for yourself," Dam Sorrel said. "I would have let her in."

Sorrel was calling me "her" even though she knew I was a boy.

"We are a sisterhood," Dam Ilma said. She sat up straighter, started talking a little faster, more animated. "Witchcraft is for women. It always has been. The role of women has come a long way in the past few hundred years. A few women knights. A powerful Duchess. That's great. But it doesn't mean we're social equals to men. King Sallow killed off every order of witches he could because he couldn't handle feminine power, and the world hasn't come too far since then. So we're a sisterhood. We're women who work ley, who keep a feminine tradition alive against a world that wants us destroyed. We're a sisterhood. We're women."

"I don't disagree with you about any of that, that's the thing," Sorrel said. "You know what I told Dam Catkin? I told her what I grew up to believe. What my mothers and my grandmothers taught me. Being a woman is at least as much what you do as it is how you were born. There're all kinds of people in this world. There are people born girls who decide they'd rather be men. There are people born boys who decide to be women. Even just from how we're born, there are women with beards and men with breasts and there are people with both parts down below. Regardless of how we're born, we get to decide who we are and who we want to be."

Her words echoed in my mind. I didn't know how to make sense of them, of what it meant for me, but I knew it was important.

"If she wants to be in a sisterhood, she wants to be one of our sisters," Dam Rose said. "I don't see her trying to make it a boy's club, I see her trying to join us. Not change us."

"Makes sense to me," Dam Lament said.

"And me," Alectoria agreed.

"I just don't like it, that's all," Dam Ilma said. "And there are people in the Order who like it less."

“I’ll fight every last one of them,” Sorrel said.

“Listen,” Lament said, “the land is being destroyed. Helte is after us, and I don’t think it’s just because she thinks we’re blighters. There’s a war coming and they’re trying to stomp us out. Great Mother, maybe Helte is working with blighters herself. Who counts as a boy, who counts as a girl, I don’t care right now. We’ve got to get the rest of the Order together. We’ve got to call for Summerhome.”

The rest of the coven muttered “Summerhome” under their breaths like it was a curse.

“What we’ve got to do,” Alectoria announced, leaning against the casket of her child, “is relax! We lost a sister today. We should get drunk. Drunker. Go swimming. Maybe not while we’re drunk. Lorel’s fate is already decided. Lorel is already initiated, and we’re sworn to protect our whelps. Helte doesn’t matter today. Not even the rotting blight matters today.”

“Let’s make sure she can get the ritual done sooner than later,” Dam Sorrel said. “If she wants it.”

“You giving up another arm bone?” Dam Ilma asked. Now that her voice had calmed down, the wine slurred her words.

Sorrel shuddered as remembered pain flashed across her face.

“She’ll find someone,” she murmured.

“I hope you’re right,” Ilma said. “It’ll be a lot easier for everyone if he figures that out.”

Soon they were talking about lighter topics, gossiping about other witches, mostly.

I walked off, feeling lost. After I’d learned about Dam Catkin, I’d thought, for a moment, that my worries were over. But I was still being argued about.

I wandered to the very edge of the ship graveyard, to one of the oldest hulks. A crow’s nest stood sentinel thirty feet above deck. Lament told us it was better not to let our fears fester, and facing a physical fear felt like something I could do. Some action I could take.

A rope ladder hung down, with wooden slats. It took me ages to climb, pulling myself up with my good hand and bracing myself with the rope in the other elbow. The familiar sense of fear soon overcame the rest of my worry, and eventually I made it to the top.

I could see the mountains and the forests and the lake and the black sand and the fishing village and birds. The sun hid behind clouds, a faint breeze kept me cool, and I let myself calm down.

It wasn’t how you were born that made you a woman.

Hair had already started to grow on my legs—not just my calves, like most girls, but my thighs too. My chest was smooth. My face was smooth.

But for how long? One day, my body was going to betray me, unless I changed it. Unless I didn't need to change it.

Was it easier to change my body or change how the world viewed it? Did I want to transform my body because I wanted people to see me as a girl? Or did I want to transform my body because I wanted a different body? I didn't know.

All I knew was that I wanted to be a witch. All I knew was that I wanted people to let me be a woman. To call me a woman, to treat me like a woman. Anything about my body, that felt secondary. The main problem with my body was that my hand was broken, not what was between my legs. That was an afterthought.

A trio of gulls flew close, crying out. They didn't care what I was.

If I was a witch, drawing up ley from the earth and bending it to my will, no one would care what I was.

Maybe I'd change my body. Maybe I'd just disguise it. Maybe there were ways I could change some parts of me and not others. Trying to figure it out exhausted me, and I lay down in the crow's nest and fell asleep.

I woke up when the sun broke through the clouds. I didn't know how long I'd been asleep, or if anyone was looking for me. Still groggy, I started to climb down the ladder. In my grogginess, I forgot my hand wasn't working. When I grabbed for the rope, it failed me. My hand wouldn't close. I spun wildly, grasping for the rope with my other arm, trying to catch hold of anything, but I didn't succeed. I fell.

The sky was all I saw as I fell. All I thought about was that sky. That maybe it was the last thing I'd see.

When I hit, legs first, I didn't black out. I wish I'd blacked out. Instead, I collapsed, broken, onto the deck. There was blood in my eyes and there was blood on the deck.

Shouldn't have climbed the mast.

Shouldn't have faced my fears.

We're afraid of things for reasons. Afraid of heights for reasons. Afraid of swords. Afraid of magic. All for good reasons.

As I drifted in and out of consciousness, I saw ley. Nothing bright. Just wisps in the wind. Magic was all around me—power was all around me—and I didn't have the first idea how to wield it. I could throw a punch, grapple a foe, kill a white wyrm, but I couldn't do anything with magic.

I could have helped myself if I knew magic.

"Help!" I shouted, my words becoming a cry of pain. "Help!"

Then, finally, mercifully, I blacked out.

It was dark in the aft cabin of the ship. The ley was bright, but the room was dark. I couldn't see anything but the ley. Ley doesn't illuminate, I

remembered. Just like in the cave. Good, never stop learning. Even when you're halfdead or dying.

Around me, in all that darkness, were the other whelps. Three of them. I counted them, because that's what you're supposed to do when you hit your head. You're supposed to count things, to make sure your brain is working.

"Three," I said, as though they'd asked me. Clearly, my brain wasn't working.

"She's delirious," Henomi suggested.

"I'm dying," I corrected.

"You're a useless brat with a flair for the dramatic," Daidi suggested.

"What?"

"You're not dying," Daidi said. "Your legs are broken, you're clearly concussed, and you lost a lot of blood, but we stopped the bleeding and splinted you up and you're not dying."

"Oh," I said, pain cutting my thoughts in half and jumbling what remained. "Sort of wish I was dying. Three. Three whelps. Where's Haim?"

"Here," she said, walking in with a rainbow of light.

She set the cage down next to me.

It was not finely wrought. It was not ornate. It might have been jeweler's brass and not gold, now that I saw it close up.

The tree inside was dazzling, and the skull glowed faintly. My eyes couldn't hold focus on it, and trying hurt my head.

It soaked up the ley from the room until the ley was no more.

"Destroy it," I said. "Kill it."

"It can heal you," Haim replied.

All at once I realized—the whelps hadn't been healed by the witches. They'd healed themselves. With the cage, somehow.

"It's true," Araneigh said. "Daidi healed me and Henomi."

"How?" I asked. "How do you know magic?"

"You don't need to know magic to use it," Daidi said. "Not really. You just … ask it for what you want."

"But, it'll kill more trees …"

"The trees are already dead. Destroying this thing won't bring them back. Whoever they killed to make it, they're already dead too."

"Kill it," I said. I thought about Dam Heavens, burning on the pyre. I thought about the dead trees, missing children, missing witches. I thought about Dam Rose running a man through with a spear. I thought about Dam Ghin, sinking below the water. "Don't care. Kill it."

"Stand up," Daidi said. She took the cage away and set it on the stairs a few yards away. "Stand up and kill it yourself."

I couldn't stand up. Even trying to prop myself up on my elbows and crawl tore my brain apart.

Daidi laughed.

Why didn't anyone stop her?

I couldn't crawl, not even a foot. I collapsed face-first into the floor.

Why wouldn't anyone help me?

"Alright," I whispered. "Alright. I give up. Heal me."

I walked on new bones out to the forest, holding the cage, badly hidden, under my cloak. It was too hot to wear a cloak. Daidi and Henomi kept me company while Haim and Araneigh set off to distract the witches. I jumped a little at every crack of a branch and every cry of a gull. I'd never been jumpy before. I didn't like it.

We had no shovel, but we found a hollow left in the earth by an uprooted fir. I put the cage into the hole and we covered it with rocks and branches and dirt and moss until no light shone through. Then we packed it in more.

I knew that we should destroy it, not just hide it. Even though it had healed me, we needed to destroy it. But I was too afraid of its power, and I was too afraid to cross Daidi, and I was too afraid to disappoint the rest of the whelps. So I buried the gilded cage and its blight-born tree in the forest.

None of us said anything the entire time, until we were on our way back.

"I shouldn't have been that way to you," Daidi said, ducking under a branch across the path.

"Which way?"

"Cruel. I can be cruel. I don't know why I'm like that."

"It's okay," I said, although I wasn't sure it was.

"I'm going to try not to do that again."

"Okay," I said.

"I think the reason I don't like you and the reason I was mean to you is that you're a boy."

I stopped in my tracks.

"We all saw, when we carried you from where you fell." She stopped too. "We won't tell, don't worry."

A few weeks ago, being found out seemed like it would be the end of the world, maybe the end of my life. But now the worst had happened, and I was still standing. That was something.

"I've never liked boys," Daidi kept talking, as though all of this was about her. "They've always been awful to me. You've been nice, though, mostly."

"I've never liked boys for the same reason," I told her.

“Well, then there’s that,” Daidi said. “You should be extra careful when we get to Summerhome, though. Who knows what people would do to you if word got out.”

Before we left, I wrote letters to my mom, my dads, and to Lane. I avoided specifics in all of them, which made me sad. I wanted to hear all about their lives, every detail, and here I was just offering generalities to them. It felt hopeless. I wanted to feel connected to them, but I didn’t. It was hard to believe my letters would ever reach them. It was hard to believe I’d hear from them again at all.

→ TWENTY ←

Three weeks later, our entire covenant walked up the ancient but well-kept road to Summerhome.

We had walked through valleys and over passes, mostly sticking to the woods. We walked past way, way too many patches of colddead. It took me a while to realize, but we could have gotten there much faster—we were taking the long way, exploring the damage of the blight.

I walked with a spear in my hand and an axe on my belt. Now it wasn't just the whelps training with weapons every morning. The fight with blighters had clearly scared the covenant, and almost all the witches trained under Dam Lament shortly after dawn.

I was finally starting to feel comfortable fighting. I'd helped take down a white wyrm, after all. Confidence made me better. I was still no match for my teacher, and Araneigh was getting better by the day too, so I still lost to her more often than not. I also wasn't so afraid of being found out, so I didn't have to surrender so easily. I beat some of the older witches occasionally, the ones who clearly hadn't used weapons much at all since they were whelps themselves. I could feel my body learning to act unconsciously. Things started flowing. Lament noticed my confidence and improvement, and gave me a real spear and an axe. I walked a little bit taller after that.

I also made a point to help with the cooking every evening, and the cleaning up after, no matter how tired I was. I liked cooking, and I wanted to be useful, but I realized eventually I was doing it because I had something to prove. That I wasn't a boy, that I wasn't going to make women do the work that got called women's work for me.

In the evenings, us whelps camped together in a circle. Before, we'd camped haphazardly, or friend next to friend, but after what we'd seen, what we'd done, it felt right to set up our blankets in a circle, our heads facing in, where we could talk late into the night, or just stare at the sky.

Daidi opened up. She sometimes snapped at us, she sometimes snarled.

Some nights she slept with her head facing out and her toes by our heads. But she opened up, all the same.

The final stretch of the stone road was so steep I fought for breath. It seemed, at first, to lead to nowhere. It seemed to lead directly into the side of the mountain, a dormant volcano. But once we were close, I saw gatehouses on either side of the road; the city was set inside the volcano's caldera and used its tall rock walls as a natural fortification.

For the last few hundred yards, witches lined the path, lit by the early morning sun. They stood quiet and still in their black summer dresses, faces lost under the deep shadow of wide-brimmed summer hats. Hundreds of witches, of every age and shape and color, all there to greet us in silent honor. I'd heard stories, as a child, about the silent parade of witches. I'd assumed it was a legend.

Until that moment, I hadn't thought very long or hard about what we'd accomplished, besides the fairly major act of not dying at the hands of knights or blighters.

But in the past few months, we'd escaped an attack by a squad of tax knights and we'd tracked down and defeated a large cell of blighters. We'd faced down monsters so ancient they weren't even in folklore. That wasn't nothing. Us whelps were at the back of our procession, and after we passed each witch, she stepped into the path and followed us into the city.

Because it was, in the end, a city. Summerhome, it turned out, was what the Order called Blackcliff, a half-abandoned settlement atop a dormant volcano of the same name. Hundreds of years back, lava had crept forth from fissures and swallowed half the city, and not much remained intact. Some herders, some merchants, and a handful of traveling theater troupes were the only people who called the place home.

The city was O shaped, surrounding a lake that filled the volcano's caldera. No fish swam in the lake, because no rivers flowed into it. The water all came from rainfall and snowmelt. All the buildings faced inward toward the water. Ley poured out of the lake, a thin mist of lavender and rose. Half the city was built into the volcanic glass, and everything was beautiful.

Whatever else I could say about having joined the witches, I'd seen more of the world and its wonders in a few months than I had in my entire childhood.

From what I'd gathered on our trip, the witches used Summerhome all together as an Order only a few times in a generation, only when there was a reason to gather everyone together before Endsmeet. It was very, very hard to find a steady and still source of ley during the hotter months, and Blackcliff Lake was the best they knew of. Game was sparse, food was

sparse, magic was sparse. It wasn't ideal. But it was easy to defend, and the few long-term residents had a love for witches that bordered on fanatical.

The formalities seemed to end as soon as we crossed into the city itself, and the parade dissipated into the streets. Our coven walked up a steep road, high up away from the lake, to a beautiful mansion set into the rim of the crater itself.

Ancient hinges screamed as Dam Lament and Dam Rose worked together to pry the door open. A few bats fled out into the daylight and up into the sky.

"This place is amazing," Araneigh said, ducking inside. By the time the rest of us stood in the grand entrance hall, beneath a broken balcony, Araneigh was playing an old harpsichord that was horrendously out of tune.

"I hate this place," Dam Sorrel said.

"It smells like death," Araneigh said cheerfully, then played another discordant series of notes.

"Most of the stairs are rotten through," Dam Alectoria said. "Lorel, Araneigh, you're light enough. Find yourself a room somewhere upstairs. Careful though. Then afterwards, you're free until nightfall."

Araneigh played one more terrible chord and hopped up, excited. We went off to explore the building.

The place was filthy with dust and rot, though the dry air seemed to keep it free of mold. Araneigh and I climbed and climbed stairs until we stood in a tower room that overlooked the city. If there'd ever been glass in the windows, it had long since broken and fallen away. Based on the droppings and the nests, a handful of birds had clearly lived there recently, or still did. The midday sun cut across the floor and lit up a few bunks carved into the wall and some indecipherable runes set into the floor.

"This one," I said. "This is our room."

"There's bird poop."

"This one," I insisted. "I'm living in this room."

"Why? It'll take forever to climb the stairs every day."

"Because it's beautiful," I said. "My mother always told me, if you pay attention to what you think is beautiful, you'll be better at knowing what you love."

"I can't argue with that," Araneigh said. She set down her basket on one of the bunks. "Do you think I'm beautiful?"

The question caught me so off guard that it took me a while to actually understand what she'd asked. I had a crush on Araneigh. It was useless to deny it.

“Sure,” I said.

“You’re the worst,” she said. “You’re cute, but you’re the worst.”

“The worst at what?” I asked.

“Just the worst,” she said. She stepped close to me, stood up on her tiptoes, and kissed me on the mouth. Just briefly.

My lips tingled. My face flushed.

“Just the worst,” she said again. Then she smiled at me, turned away, and walked down the stairs.

I stood there grinning, confused, for a few seconds while her footsteps receded.

“Well?” she called up the stairwell. “You coming or not? I’m going to see what there is to see in Summerhome.”

Two inns stood sentinel over the city, just outside the front gate. On the north side of the road was a proper tavern with wood walls, glass windows, and a sharply angled cedar shingle roof. On its sign, a black horse rode on a green field.

Across the street was an entire shantytown somehow crammed into a single mansion. Some of it was stonework, some of it wood. Some of it had been carved into the lava flow that had built up against the city wall. No sigil or symbol stood over the door, just the name written out: The Burning City.

“Well,” Araneigh said, “our choice is clear.”

For a moment, I was terrified she meant for us to go into the Happy Horse or whatever the boring place was called. But I caught her eye, and we both turned to the ramshackle mansion of an inn at the same time. Each of our smiles mirrored the other.

We didn’t even make it through the front door before I heard someone shout my name. It took a long moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light, provided only by distant tiny windows and a few cleverly placed mirrors, but when they did, I saw Hex sitting at a table of Ilthurian knights. Despite myself, I smiled when I saw her.

“Araneigh!” Hex called again. “Lorel!”

She waved us over and stood up from the table to hug us both fiercely. She was a new person, that much was clear. It wasn’t all for the better. The anger was gone from her face, but a scar across her temple, poorly healing, had replaced it.

She turned and glared at the knights on either side of her, each twice her age, and they scooted over to make room. We sat.

“Where’s Espen?” I asked.

“He’ll be here, Mother willing,” the man next to me said.

“He’s out on a mission!” Hex said.

The woman across from us, the oldest of the knights here, scowled.

“Well, I didn’t tell her what kind of mission,” Hex said.

“Daidi will be so happy to see you,” Araneigh said.

“I can’t wait! I could barely believe it when I found out we were coming to Summerhome, of all places.”

“What brought you here?” I asked.

“Well,” Hex said, then looked to the woman across from her for permission. The woman nodded. “We’re here for the same reason as you, I expect. Got to figure out what we’re going to do about all the … troubles. With Helte and the blighters.”

“I don’t understand it,” I said. “We killed a lot of blighters and destroyed a bunch of their cages. Can’t we just … tell the other knights? Tell them we’re on the same side?”

“We’re not, though,” Hex said.

“What do you mean?”

“They’re in on it. Not all of the knights, but a lot of them.”

“What?!” I shouted, then put my hand over my mouth and lowered my voice. “They’re in on it? The other knights?”

“It’s politics,” Hex said. “It’s part of how Helte is gonna make a play for the throne.”

“That can’t happen, though,” I said. “No one even wants a kingdom anymore. None of the peasants or lords will support her.” That’s what I’d been told my whole life, and I had no reason to doubt it.

“Since when do kings and queens and dukes and duchesses care what people want?” the man next to me asked.

“They only care about what they can get away with. They only care about power.”

“Either way, whatever her motive, we know she’s taking over every barony and smallholding she can,” the woman across from us said. She had skin as dark as aged iron, and she seemed too young for her head of short, gray curls. “Rumor has her working miracles—”

“Blight magic,” I said.

“Exactly,” Hex agreed.

“So what about the knights?” I asked. “I mean, the other knights. They’re after us because they think we’re blighters, so they shouldn’t be helping her.”

“She’s stirring everyone up, turning them against anyone who might stop her or the blight,” the older woman said. “Witches, Ilthurians, brigands, the merchant houses, everyone. She’s blaming the blight on witches, of course.”

“We’ve got to stop her,” I said.

“That’s why we’re here,” she agreed. “To convince the Order of the Vine to join us.”

“That shouldn’t take long,” I said.

Somewhere at another table, a crowd of gamblers cheered at something that happened in their game.

The older Ilthurian knight smiled. “Wish I had your confidence.”

TWENTY-ONE

I was wrong, of course. It turns out witches could be a rather stubborn lot, and there was no high crone or someone like that to appeal to.

Witches made decisions by discussion in an open council. In Summerhome, the council met at an amphitheater near the center of town. That first afternoon after our arrival, most of the Order was present. The oldest crones sat closest to the stage in wicker chairs, while the youngest, including apprentices and whelps, perched on stone benches at the outer rim.

Some of the crones were truly monstrous—Ilma's feathers and claws were far from the strangest transformations. One woman had goat legs, horns, and bat wings. Another was a giant, at least nine feet tall and nearly as wide across the belly and shoulders. A third seemed literally to be made only of skin and bones, a walking skeleton. These were the creatures out of myths and folklore, the kinds of witches mothers tell their children about to scare them into obedience.

I could only imagine what their lives must be like, hunted as freaks and nightmares. They'd taken great risks to leave their homes and join the Order here at Summerhome.

The elder Ilthurian knight from the tavern stood on the stage, with witches on either side of her. Regal in her tabard, her gray hair now braided in rows close to her scalp in the manner of warriors. A sword rested easy on her hip, and the dull steel of chainmail peeked out from under her clothes.

Dam Alectoria introduced the knight as Ilthura Natal, then let her speak. Natal told the crowd what she'd told us before. Duchess Helte had made common cause with the blighters, and she was behind the attacks by the tax knights. She said Ilthurian spies had reported that the other knightly orders were joining in as well. Under the guise of attacking blighters, these knights were attacking all of Helte's enemies.

Then she told us more.

She told us how the Duchess's knights had rooted out Ilthurian safehouses in three cities, killing not only the knights but their supporters as well. In Port Cek, the safehouse had doubled as a school for street children, all of whom were slaughtered. She ended her speech on that grim note and was escorted from the stage and out of the amphitheater. She wasn't invited to remain for the deliberation.

"Dark times and woeful words," the giantess said, her voice like thunder rolling across the plains. "Every five years, every ten years. Dark times and woeful words. All of this, the Order has survived. We will survive again."

"You can no more destroy the Order with swords and fire than you can destroy a flock of starlings with an arrow," the skeletal witch said.

"Go to ground, I say," a third crone agreed.

I could barely believe what I was hearing.

I wasn't alone in that, at least. From the middle ranks—from the witches only as old as humans might normally be—loud mumbling clearly signaled dissent. Finally, Dam Alectoria spoke.

"The politics of the Duchess are one thing," she said. "It's true there was an Order before the kingdom broke apart, and there might be an Order if the kingdom returns. But the colddead blight is spreading, and that we can't ignore. Without ley, there is no Order."

"You met this new magic with fire and spear," the giantess said. "Your covenant alone. We might meet them with words. We might seek balance, seek compromise."

"There is no compromise with the destruction of the Great Mother!" Dam Alectoria shouted.

And so it went. For an hour or more, I watched witches argue. Half the time, I was convinced that the witches' leaderless ways were going to doom us all—if Alectoria had been in charge, it would have been sorted out easily enough. Then I remembered if there were a leader who was not Alectoria, if the skeletal witch had been in charge, for example, things might have gone a lot worse.

These witches were used to arguing, but they did it in a way I'd never seen before. They actually listened to one another. The giantess came around, for example, and ended up arguing in favor of fighting blighters and offering limited support to the Ilthurian cause. The devil—I don't know what else to call the woman with goat legs and bat wings—fully supported mobilizing for war and killing Helte.

The only consensus that was reached, after hours of debate, was that blighters were enemies of the Order and that the entire Order ought to support the vendetta declared by our covenant against them. Dam Lament's recounting of Dam Ghin's death at the hands of the blighters

finally won people over on that point.

Still, no plans were made. Nothing concrete was determined. We'd be at Summerhome for a while as they hashed out plans.

On our way back to the coven's house, we met a merchant walking up the road with a heavy sack over one shoulder.

"Mail for the witches," he said from behind a thick white mustache.

He opened the sack. Dam Ilma reached in with her claws and pulled out four envelopes immediately—more magic. One for Dam Rose, two for Dam Ilma, and one for me.

"Thank you," Dam Ilma said, handing the man a coin.

With a quiet nod of his head, he kept walking.

"Never any mail for me," Araneigh complained as we walked in the front door of our decrepit mansion. Most of the time, I envied her strange and magical upbringing. Just then, though, I was glad I had family.

"You miss your father?" Dam Sorrel asked.

"No," Araneigh said. Then she answered honestly: "Yes."

"Write him sometime," she said. "I'm sure he'd be happy to hear from you."

"Maybe." Araneigh left the conversation by walking over to the harpsichord. Soon she had its cover off and was trying to tune it by ear.

I sat down on a stone bench nearby.

The letter was from Lane, that was obvious. It bore the Tower Knights' gray seal.

Lorel of the Vine,

It's … it's a bad time to be caught writing to a witch. You might not hear from me for a while, and I'm sorry for that. You probably shouldn't write me back, either.

I miss you, you're wonderful. I'm worried. I'm worried something awful. The knights … there's bad talk going on. Real bad talk.

I figure you're in Blackcliff, I listen in when the knights talk about you all. They're planning something. Not us Tower Knights, but Sir Hamal can't keep us neutral forever. The blight's spreading, and people are hungry, and the Duchess is promising to end all that and bring food to everyone and says that it's you witches in the way.

I don't believe it. Sir Hamal doesn't believe it.

But … Lorel. I think you should run. Get away from the witches. Get out of Blackcliff. They're coming for you. All the brotherhoods, all of them but ours.

If you run to Oldking, a lot of us Tower Knights hang out at a tavern called Dead City at the docks. If you don't run to Oldking, just run somewhere.

Run.

I swear I say this with love,

Lane of the Lead and the Tower

I showed the letter to Dam Alectoria. I didn't know what else to do. I wasn't afraid, not really. I knew I should have been. Instead, I was excited. A new kind of excitement, a guilty kind of excitement.

"You going to do it?" Alectoria asked. "You going to run?"

"Of course not," I said. "I just … if all the knights are planning to attack us here, shouldn't we all run?"

"Maybe," Alectoria said. "Maybe." She looked thoughtful, but that was all she said of it.

Nearly all the witches ate dinner together that night, sitting with our covens in the grand hall of a ramshackle old hotel. Eating inside, at a table, felt like a strange and unnecessary formality after so long eating under the open sky. But the food was wonderful, and more varied than I'd had in ages: fresh venison, roasted root vegetables, and a thick porridge sweetened with honey. Next chance I had, I would find the cooks and volunteer.

After dinner, we marched in a silent procession to the lake. An unevenly maintained boardwalk surrounded the entire thing, and we tromped along it until the Order lined the entire shore.

Though Araneigh and I and the other whelps were invited to witness what came next, no one explained it. One crone, whom I'd never seen before, walked out onto the lake, dropping petals as she went. Standing on the surface of the water in the center of the lake, she sang.

I couldn't tell if her words were magic or not. It sounded less like witch song and more like the opera I'd heard in Port Cek. I saw ley run up her body in tendrils, up her legs and into her mouth, but we never entered the red realm of witchlight. She just sang, in some language I'd never heard.

Her song began in the gloaming and finished in the black of night, lit only by the full moon above her. I was mesmerized the entire time. It was so soulful, so mournful. When at last she ended, she glowed with lavender ley like a human torch.

She strode back out to the edge of the lake and walked a sunwise circle. She clasped hands with each of us, even the whelps. When I felt her skin—dry like old paper, yet familiar and comfortable—some of the ley flowed over me and sank into my skin. I didn't feel it as anything, but I saw it.

It took her a long time to complete the full circle, and I got antsy. There were more than a hundred covens, most with at least ten witches. Magic was always interesting, but it was more interesting when I knew what was happening. I looked over—Araneigh was bored too.

We caught one another's eyes, and I reached out my hand. She took it.

I wasn't bored anymore, as simple as that. We intertwined our fingers and held tight. The moon and the stars could have gone out, and the Lords of the Nether could have ridden to battle against the Great Mother, and everything could have been consumed by darkness. I wouldn't have cared. After the ritual, Araneigh and I started back to the coven's mansion. When we stood in front of the door, I didn't feel ready to go in. It might have been the ley, it might have been Araneigh, it might have just been the end of an overwhelming day.

"Do you want to go explore?" I asked.

Araneigh looked sleepy, but she smiled nonetheless.

Lanterns and cauldron fires and the cold light of magical flame dotted the landscape down by the lake—one fire seemed to be on the surface of the lake itself—so I led us up, away from it all. The city was protected from the outside world by the rim of the volcano, but it didn't take long to find a set of stairs that climbed that natural wall.

It took longer to get up it. Even conditioned by months of walking, I was out of breath by the time we reached the top.

It was worth it, though. A walkway ran a few hundred yards in each direction at the top. Probably where guards had kept their posts in centuries past.

We could see the whole of Summerhome, as well as miles and miles of moonlit fields and roads and towns surrounding us. The height bothered me, a little, but I felt more secure with Araneigh next to me.

"Sometimes I miss my forest," Araneigh said. "Then I see things like this and I'm glad I left."

"Yeah," I said.

"I wish all this world-ending bad-hunt colddead knights and Duchess nonsense wasn't happening," she said. "Not just because it's hard and it's scary, but because it would be nice to just … to just live the life I thought I was going to have. To just learn witchcraft and get to know you and the other girls—I guess I shouldn't say it that way, 'other girls,' since you're not a—"

"I don't mind if you call me a girl," I said. "I prefer it."

She smiled. "Get to know you and the other girls and just … learn to take care of each other and the forests and not be constantly about to die."

"I wish that too," I said. But I wasn't as certain. For some reason, the sense of urgency kept me feeling alive. And it kept my mind off my own troubles.

"What're you going to do, about, you know …" Araneigh asked. "About not getting caught? I keep thinking about that, I keep worrying about you. Learn disguise magic, maybe?"

“There’s a ritual,” I said. “It turns out I’m not the first boy who’s done this. Who’d rather be a girl, who’s joined the witches.”

“A ritual to turn you into a woman?”

“Yeah,” I said. I told her what I knew.

“Oh no,” she said, concern in her voice. That wasn’t what I expected her to say. “But I … but if you transform yourself … there’s nothing wrong with the way you are now.”

It dawned on me all at once.

“You’re only attracted to boys,” I said. I tried to keep the accusation out of my voice. We hadn’t even discussed the fact that she’d kissed me, that we were flirting, any of that, and here I was challenging it.

She turned away from me and looked back out over the landscape below.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean, yes. But then I got to know you, when I thought you were a girl, and I started to think maybe I liked you. Then I figured out you were a boy and it all made sense, why I liked you, and here we are.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” I said. “Only two people in this world know the ritual. Dam Catkin and Dam Willow. And with the world in the middle of ending, I don’t know when I’d be able to do it, even if I knew how. I don’t know if I want it, either.”

“You don’t?”

“I know I should want it. I know it would make everything easier. Well, it would make some things easier. I know it would be easier to be accepted as a woman, absolutely. But … is that reason enough to change my body? So that people believe me when I say that I feel like I’m a woman? So that I’m allowed to be a witch?”

“You don’t need it,” Araneigh said, reaching out to me.

She liked me the way that I was, but maybe not the way that I might become. I wanted to bat her hand away and storm off. But I didn’t have the heart to. So I let her hand rest on my shoulder, and I resented it, and I resented her.

The landscape was beautiful, though.

We slept in the tower room, in separate beds, and the distance between us had never been greater. Not like we were fighting. Just that we, well, we didn’t know. I woke before her on purpose and dressed. Even though she already knew my secret, even though she was asleep, I turned away from her as I got dressed. Maybe I was embarrassed, maybe shy. I didn’t really know. I just still didn’t want anyone to see me, especially not her.

I went down to the main hall. No one was around, and it was cold and lightless, so I stepped out onto the stone street outside and stood in the sun. I watched patterns of ley float through the air, subtle and shifting.

Araneigh joined me soon after. She must have heard me get up. She watched the ley with me, and somehow, even without talking, I felt the distance between us fading just a little.

Not long after, Henomi came running up the street, breathless.

"They came and took them," she said. "Witches, ten of them. Came into our room and searched everything, every corner. Dumped out our baskets, everything. Then they took them."

"Took who?" I asked.

"Haim and Daidi," Henomi said. "They came and took Haim and Daidi. I didn't recognize the witches who did it. They weren't from our covenant."

"Where?" I asked. "Where did they take them?!"

"Don't know," Henomi said.

"We're going to go find out," I said.

I didn't even turn around to see if they would follow me. I started down the street.

I turned the first corner and stopped just in time to avoid running into Dam Lament and Dam Rose.

"What's going on?!" I shouted.

A shadow caught my eye and I turned around. Araneigh and Henomi stood immediately next to me.

"Haim and Daidi have been accused of blight magic," Lament said.

"This is garbage," I said. "Where are they? We can't let the witches have them."

"This is serious, Lorel," Lament said.

"What, are they going to kill them or something?" I didn't even think it was possible as I said it, but the look in Lament's eyes told me it was worse than I'd realized.

"Where are they?" I repeated.

"During the ritual, last night, the singer poured ley into all of us. But with Haim and Daidi, the ley wouldn't take. The crones say it skimmed off their skin like oil on water. And … that's the same test we gave to Dam Heavens. When you work blight, it burns you. Keeps the ley from touching you."

"That was the point of the ritual?" I asked. "To figure out who was impure?"

"Calm down," Lament said. She didn't say it kindly.

"Daidi and Haim, they did it for us," Araneigh said. "They healed us."

"Healed who?" Rose asked.

"Me," Araneigh said. "The white wyrm almost killed me."

"And me," Henomi said. "I was bleeding something bad."

"That it?" Lament asked.

I took a deep breath. “And me. I fell. I was broken. They healed me.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” Dam Lament said. She met each of our gazes in turn. “You didn’t tell us, and you’ll never tell anyone else.”

“What’s going to happen to them?” Henomi asked.

“Nothing,” I said. “Nothing’s going to happen to them, because we’re not going to let anything happen to them.”

“Great Mother,” Dam Lament said. “I don’t think you understand how serious this is.”

“Where are they?” I asked.

“Go back inside,” Lament answered.

“To rot with you,” I snapped. I tried to walk past her. She reached out to grab me by the collar of my cloak. I dodged out of the way.

“I’m telling you this for your own good,” Lament said, tears on her face. “You don’t want to tell the witches that blight magic healed you. You, of all people, don’t want that. You don’t want people looking at you closely.”

“I’m going,” I said. My voice shook. Of course I didn’t want to be discovered. Of course I didn’t want to implicate myself with blight magic. But Haim and Daidi were in trouble for what they’d done for me.

“You might die,” Rose said, barely above a whisper.

“I’m going.” This time, my voice was strong. I started down the hill. Henomi and Araneigh followed me.

We reached a fork in the road and I went right on instinct, since it led most immediately to the lake and the amphitheater.

“Stop,” Lament said. Her voice had such authority that we paused.

“What?” I asked, angry.

“You’re going the wrong way,” Lament said. “I’ll take you.”

TWENTY-TWO

The tribunal convened at the highest point in the city, inside a broken guard tower set into the side of a jagged spike of mountain. It took us approximately forever to climb the stairs leading up to it.

When we arrived, out of breath, there were thirty-nine witches in thirty-nine seats—three sets of thirteen—surrounding a raised central dais. The ceiling was long gone and the room opened up to an empty, cloudless sky.

I recognized a few of the witches on the tribunal, but there were only two I knew well: Dam Ilma and Dam Willow. Dam Willow had arrived.

Haim and Daidi sat on the dais. Daidi looked defiant, Haim miserable.

Worry for both of them flowed through me like water. Daidi, who'd lost her best friend already. Now she was set to lose what? Her chance at becoming a witch? Her life?

"Get those whelps out of here," a witch snarled when we entered the chamber. "Dam Lament, what are you doing?"

"There are no secret proceedings within an Order," Lament responded.

"They're not witches, they're whelps."

There was nowhere for bystanders to stand in the room, and only a few of us fit into the doorway at a time. I walked to the center of the room and climbed onto the dais.

"My name is Lorel of the Vine, and I am part of the Order of the Vine. Haim of the Vine, Daidi of the Vine, they are my sisters. What you do to them, you do to me."

"Lorel, get out of here," someone said, worry and anger fighting for control of her voice. It took me a moment to scan the crowd and find the speaker. Dam Ilma.

"The whelp wants to be punished. Let her."

Daidi and Haim stood up, and all three of us held hands. Daidi was crying, I could see now that I was close to her. She squeezed my hand so tight her nails bit into my skin.

“If you’re going to kill us,” I said, “you’ll need to kill all of us.”

“Oh for the Mother’s sake,” another voice said, “we’re not going to kill you. You’re children. Nothing but children.”

“You’re not?” I asked.

“We’re going to exile you. Was only going to be two of you, but I guess it’s three of you. No matter.”

“Four of us,” a voice said. Araneigh climbed onto the dais.

“Fine.”

“Five,” Henomi said. Haim knelt down to help her up.

“Whelps Haim and Daidi made use of blight magic,” one of the witches said. “No matter their purpose, it has tainted them, closed them off to ley. I don’t know if we can teach them magic at this point anyway. Trying would be a waste of time. It’s not even punishment. We don’t punish children. It’s consequence.”

“We’re in a war against blighters?” I asked.

“We are.”

“Whelps Haim and Daidi have done more to fight the blighters than any of you sitting in those chairs except Dam Ilma. They did it without knowing a single spell. They did it with axes, they did it with their fists. Maybe it cost them their ability to use magic—”

“I’m not convinced that it did,” Dam Ilma said. “It seems likely as not it will wear off.”

“So just … just drop it. Let us all go back to our covens.”

“Were we so insolent as children?” one witch asked.

“Why do you think my mother gave me to the Order?” another laughed.

“We can’t well afford to lose every whelp from this year’s crop,” another witch said.

It was going to work.

“Tell me,” Dam Willow said, “this sapling cage you made use of. Where is it now?”

I looked nervously at Daidi and Henomi.

“Buried it,” Daidi said. “At the foot of The Wanderer.”

“We could use a blight tree for study,” someone said.

“We can’t spare any witches to retrieve it,” someone said.

“Send the whelps,” someone else said, cackling. “After all, they apparently don’t need any magic to protect themselves. Don’t think they need us at all. Just the five of them alone ought to do it.”

“They won’t go alone,” Dam Rose said.

“No, we need you here.”

“You have no power to stop us,” Dam Lament said.

“I swear to the Mother that there was a time when witches and whelps

respected their elders," one witch complained.

"I never did," one of the crones laughed. The whole tribunal cackled.

"No one is exiled today," Dam Ilma said. "You lot, you better get going. Today."

Anger coursed through me as we walked to the stables. I knew I should have been ecstatic that the whole thing had worked, should have been proud that we'd banded together to protect each other. Nevertheless, I was just angry and bitter.

Dam Willow was in Summerhome, and now I was leaving. I hadn't had a chance to say a single word to her, to ask her about the ritual. At least she was alive and seemed well.

It would have taken two weeks to get to The Wanderer on foot if we walked direct, so Dam Rose bought horses from a merchant family who'd set up a makeshift stable at the edge of town.

The stable was mostly full of the smaller horses that mountain folk rode, but a few massive warhorses stared at us as we picked out our mounts. Those belonged to the Ilthurians and weren't for sale.

The chance to ride again chipped away at my terrible mood. Haim was even more excited about it than I was—she'd clearly grown up in the saddle. Daidi and Henomi barely knew how to get into one. Araneigh wanted to ride without any saddle at all, and only relented when I convinced her that for a long journey like ours, a saddle was kinder to the mount.

Ancient cedars grew all around the stables, and the air was fresh in that way I've only ever encountered in the mountains. I found a bay who seemed to like me, and I spent some time brushing her down. Calming a horse is a good way to calm yourself.

My mother sometimes told me it's important, at least once a day, to find something beautiful and take the time to appreciate its beauty. A moment or a friend or the scenery. The moment with the other whelps in the stable, it was all of those things.

Footsteps broke my reverie, and I looked up just in time to see two armored figures approach. Hex and Espen.

Daidi ran directly at Hex, who scooped her into a huge hug.

"Where are you off to so early?" Espen asked. His nonchalance was a transparent lie.

"We're going to—" Araneigh started.

"We're going to leave," Dam Lament finished for her. "We'll be back in a few weeks."

"A mission," Espen said.

"Yes," Lament said.

"A secret one?" he asked.

“Yes.”

He grinned. He was flirting with her, even as he was trying to get information out of her. “Can we come?”

“No,” Dam Lament said.

“You need protection,” he offered.

“We do not,” Dam Lament countered.

“I’m bored here,” he said. “It’s all politics now. Ilthurians trying to convince witches to join us, and it’s just meetings and empty promises, and it’s boring.”

“You think helping us on a mission will make the Order of the Vine trust you and yours more,” Lament said.

“That too.”

Rose whispered something in Lament’s ear.

“Alright,” Dam Lament said. “You can come with us.”

“Good,” Espen said. “Tailing you was going to be annoying.”

“And impossible.”

“Annoying,” Espen repeated.

“You’re celibate,” I said. “Quit flirting.”

“You’re that girl with the secret!” Espen said. “Lorel, right?”

“She’s the girl with my cloak,” Hex answered.

“You look better in armor anyway,” Daidi said.

Haim and I led the horses out to the road. Hex helped Daidi and Henomi into their saddles, and the rest of us mounted up. The whole errand seemed less like an errand and more like a mission with Espen and Hex along, and I was happy for their company.

The sun shone bright and beautiful on us as we rode out.

“What did you say to Dam Lament?” I asked Dam Rose as we broke into a trot on a straightaway.

She giggled. “I told her he might need help getting in and out of his armor.”

It took us three days to get out of the mountains, and it would be another four to Lake Leur. We needed to use the roads, since we were on horseback, so once we reached more populated lands we only traveled by night.

I’d grown used to the routine of walking with our coven, and it felt strange to travel a different way. We didn’t make stew—we didn’t even have a pot among us. We ate dried rations from our packs, fresh produce from small towns, or game that Lament and Araneigh brought down. Two of us rode a few hundred yards ahead and two of us rode behind by the same distance, in case of ambush or strangers. Every time anyone passed us on the road, all but two of us hid in the woods. Witches rarely travel in pairs, so we avoided suspicion.

The world had changed in the past few weeks. Everyone we passed looked worried and wary. When Lament and I rode in front, disguised sometimes as mother and daughter, sometimes as mother and son, we learned that the blight was spreading. We learned that the knights were on a rampage, desperate to blame someone for the colddead forests. We heard rumors of strange monsters. Old monsters. Demons. Things with too many legs or not enough. Domesticated animals were disappearing. Some returned transformed. Children were disappearing. None of them returned.

Three times, we passed bodies. The first was a man, half-devoured by wolves or worse. The second and third were women who'd been tied to trees and bloodlet. Whoever had killed them had carved crescent moons into their cheeks. Killed as witches.

One of the women was a stranger, and likely not a witch at all. The second one I recognized vaguely from Summerhome. Who knows what task had sent her far from her coven. Who knows who had found her, how they'd overpowered her.

Each time we passed a body, we stopped to bury it in the forest.

We camped out of sight during the days, sleeping in the shade. Lament kept training us, of course. She even let Espen teach us—she said it was best to learn from as many teachers as possible.

Espen fought strangely. We spent hours throwing rocks one morning, and another we spent learning acrobatics.

One morning, we found a beautiful glade of clover, and he showed us grappling techniques. I watched from the side, feigning disinterest, to avoid grappling with him and having him find out things I'd prefer he not know.

"That's not how Lament has us do it," Araneigh said when he corrected her form for a throw.

"She's not the one teaching you today," Espen said.

"I bet she could beat you," Araneigh said.

"Could not," Hex said.

"Could too," Espen chimed in.

"Could too," Lament agreed.

"That's settled then," I said. "You two need to wrestle."

"No, we both agree that I'll lose," Espen said.

"Let's see it," Araneigh said.

"Fight!" Daidi said.

We all chanted. Even Dam Rose joined in.

"What are the rules?" Lament asked.

"First to submit," Espen said. "No strikes, no magic?"

Lament put down her spear, took off her boots, and approached Espen.

They circled one another, crouched low. Espen might have weighed slightly more, but Lament looked downright mean and frightful with all her scars, and had probably five years of experience on him.

Espen reached out first, trying for Lament's neck. She ducked in and under his arm, crashing into his waist with her shoulder and wrapping her arms around him. He shot out a foot to trip her, but she rebalanced easily and he went down.

A scream from the road cut through the air.

The two broke off immediately. We grabbed weapons and took off toward the shouting. None of us had time to put on shoes, and I ran despite the rocks and roots underfoot.

Six mounted knights blocked the road. One held a crossbow. Ten paces away, a black mare lay in a growing pool of blood. A peasant woman had her legs trapped under the dead horse, and two older women tried in vain to pull her free. The trapped woman screamed again.

"Shut your mouth, witch," the tax knight said. The same tax knight who'd stopped us in The Gate all those months back. I'd recognize her voice anywhere.

"Lesson," Dam Lament said to us gathered whelps while we hid in the trees. "We have more numbers, but they have more training, more weapons, and are on horseback. What do we do?"

"Talk?" Haim asked.

"To rot with talk," Hex said.

"Leave?" Daidi asked.

"Not going to happen," Espen said.

"Magic," I said. "They've got horses and crossbows. We've got magic."

"See any ley?" Dam Lament asked me.

I looked around and let my eyes drift out of focus. I'd been practicing, but I still had a hard time seeing ley when we weren't in a place of particularly strong power.

"White, flecked with silver," I said. "Coming off the trees."

"What can you do with white ley?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Black is the color of life, of possibility," Lament said.

"Kill," I said. "White can kill."

Dam Lament nodded.

"We shouldn't kill them," I said. I'd never killed anyone, not directly, and wasn't looking to start.

"White isn't just death, it's pain, it's sorrow. It's the passing of time, it's grief."

"It's lament," I said.

Dam Lament grinned.

On the road, the trapped woman fell into panic, gasping for breath.

"Shut your witch friend up or we'll do it for you," the tax knight said. She was snarling. I couldn't understand her rage.

"Please, just leave us," the friend on the ground pleaded. "She's not a witch."

"I am," Dam Rose said, stepping into the road, her shield held at the ready.

In a second, three crossbows were leveled at her chest. One fired. Rose ducked and lifted her shield in one motion, and the quarrel embedded itself deep in the wood.

"Hold," the commander ordered her knights.

Dam Lament walked out next. Armed with a spear, she didn't have a shield. One of the crossbows moved toward her. I didn't think there was enough ley to keep quarrels at bay.

Us whelps walked out next. Araneigh and Haim went first, but the rest of us were soon behind them. We had spears and axes.

"You're not witches, you're children, all of you," the knight said.

"I'm neither, I think," Ilthura Espen said as he and Hex joined us. He tossed a fist-sized rock up and down with his right hand while his left dragged a war club lazily in the dirt.

"Scum follows scum," the knight said.

"Just leave," Dam Rose said.

"I'm afraid I can't," the knight said. "Helte wants every witch we can find."

"Why?" Dam Rose asked.

"Ask her yourself. She wants bodies and has … how did she say it? A 'vague preference' for those bodies to still be breathing. We've left a few around as warning, of course."

For the first time in my life, I wanted to kill someone.

While we talked, the two women on the road helped the third one up and they started off away from us. While we talked, Dam Rose was working a spell. She plucked threads of ley out of the air and wove them into something … a sphere. No, closer to a bee's nest.

"It's a shame, the work you do," Rose said. She threw the ball of ley. I don't think the knights could see it. It burst against a man's breastplate and flying shards of light broke out, striking all of them. The spell worked its way up noses and into mouths.

Their eyes grew wide, each in turn, as magic overcame them.

One knight broke into tears, dropping his weapons. Another dismounted and walked into the woods away from us. The other four, including their leader, just looked lost in thought.

"Get their weapons," Lament said.

We did. I took a crossbow out of the leader's hands and she said nothing, did nothing to stop me.

Half a moment later, the leader came to her senses. "Witch!" she called out.

"Accurate," Rose agreed.

"You'd better go," Lament said. "You might want to try your hand at farming, or find a good library that needs a scribe. Maybe take up the flute? We could have killed you. We didn't. Next time we see you or yours, we will."

"I have to search the woods for my man," she said.

"He'll figure something out," Lament countered.

"I won't leave him."

"You would die over that?" Lament asked.

"Yeah," Espen said. "She would."

"Fine," Lament grumbled. "Find him, then be off to your homes, and tell your precious Duchess that she won't be hunting witches anymore."

"Yes," the leader said, "she will. I will. All of us will. You got the better of us today, but we'll have tomorrow."

"To rot with this," Dam Lament said. She threw her spear. It picked up ley as it flew, and when it embedded itself into the commander's chest, the entire weapon exploded into white dust. The cloud lingered, enveloping every one of the knights, settling on and sinking into their skin.

Birds in the forest screamed and fled into the sky. Horses and knights coughed up blood and died, slow and horrid.

I panicked. I started dry heaving. Maybe it was from the horror of what I'd seen. Maybe the white dust had gotten on me. I collapsed to the ground and took deep, gasping breaths.

A dozen hands helped me up. Dam Rose embraced me. Araneigh was crying. Daidi was crying.

"It's okay to cry," Dam Rose said. She wasn't crying.

Just then, the lost knight stepped back into the road. He saw his dead friends and froze.

"Tell Duchess Helte and every knight you see," Dam Lament said. "Anyone who lays a hand on a witch, anyone who accuses anyone of witchcraft, will die in blood and sorrow."

The man only nodded, then scurried away down the road.

The women never returned for their dead horse or their saddlebags. I couldn't blame them. We dragged the horses out of the road, closed their eyes, and left them for the crows and the wolves.

Two days later, I sat on the bank of a lazy river. Henomi, Haim, and Rose floated on their backs in the water. Lament and Espen were wrestling in

the shallows, each trying to hold the other down, and Daidi and Hex were sitting near the far bank, talking about whatever those two talked about.

Araneigh came up out of the river and sat next to me in the grass.

“Still don’t feel like swimming?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Everyone knows already,” Araneigh said. “Except maybe Espen. What’s the harm?”

“I just … I don’t want to be reminded. I don’t want everyone to stare.”

“I’ll help you with the spell,” she said.

“What?” I knew what she meant, but I was taken off guard.

“The transformation. Trade a bone for a bone. You can have one of mine.”

“Will you still like me when I’m a girl?” I asked.

“Who knows? It’s not like witches get married, anyway. I mean, who knows if I’ll still like you tomorrow either way, right?”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Oh whatever. Hi. I’m right here. I like you now. I liked you when you were a girl. I got excited that you were a boy. I’m offering to help you become a girl.”

“Sorry,” I said. I reached out my hand, and she took it.

“Only Dam Willow and Dam Catkin know how to work the spell,” I said. “Catkin’s in hiding somewhere, and I have a feeling Dam Willow has got her hands full.”

“That’s okay,” Araneigh said, cheerfully. “We probably won’t live long enough to get the chance anyway.”

TWENTY-THREE

We rode in at midnight. The people of Set Harrow were decidedly not happy to see us return. Eight of them met us on the road into town, armed with sword and spear and bow.

"Since you left, everyone who's approached has either brought bad news or been bad news," one woman said, holding an axe and shield casually at her side. Fresh burns marred her neck and shoulder. "Which are you?"

"Neither, I hope," I said. "Couldn't promise you, though." On the way into town, the Dams and Espen had agreed it was our task, a whelp's task, and they'd leave the talking to us. Unless there was trouble, we were in charge. We'd learn more that way.

"Armed witches and Ilthurian knights?" a fisherman asked. "That's not something you'd see if the world was working like it's supposed to."

"We just left something here is all," Haim offered. "In the woods."

"Hoping to stay the night and take a look in the morning," Araneigh chimed in.

The peasants looked at one another uneasily for a moment. Then the burned woman nodded. "You can stay in the hulks, same as before. We've got nothing for you, though. No provisions. No aid. Brigands and knights have been through often enough this past week, begging and stealing food. Not enough left."

"We're fine," I said. "Just here for a night and we'll be on our way."

The woman nodded. They didn't clear the road into town. Instead, we walked our horses along the black sand in the light of the moon and set up camp in the lee of a hulk. It didn't look like rain, and we figured it would be better to stay with the horses.

After we made camp, Hex and Espen remounted their horses to leave.

"Where the rot are you going?" Daidi shouted when she saw.

"Our mission was to see you here safely," Espen said. "Now we've got somewhere else we have to be."

“Where?” Daidi demanded.

Espen said nothing, and Hex just looked at her friend with sorrow, and they rode off into the darkness.

I lay down on my back with my cloak wrapped around me, using my extra clothes as a pillow, and watched shooting stars. There’d been so many that summer.

We were almost done, then we’d be on our way back to Summerhome. Which the knights were planning to attack. Selfish as it was, I was glad to be on the road now. Even with bounties on our heads and unfriendliness everywhere, I felt safer away from the larger group. With just a few of us, it felt like we could hide.

Another star shot across the sky. My mother says it’s lucky, a season of falling stars. Sailors say it’s an ill omen. Maybe it would help some of us, hurt some of us. Just like time. Just like everything else.

In the morning, Daidi was gone. Her basket was still where she’d slept, but she wasn’t with it.

“Wyrms got her,” Araneigh said.

“That’s not nice to say,” Haim said.

“Doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

“Split up to find her, two groups,” Lament said. “I’m running one, Rose the other.”

“I thought we were in charge,” Haim complained.

“Until something goes wrong,” Lament corrected. “And now, something has gone wrong.”

“Wait,” I said. “Let me go look for a moment, just me. I have an idea.”

The dams relented, and I set off across the beach.

A quarter mile away, closer to town, Daidi sat behind the same log where I’d found her on our last trip, staring angrily at the water.

“Hey,” I said as I approached.

“Go away.”

“Everyone’s worried.”

“Who cares.”

“We’re all waiting for you,” I said.

“Why can’t everyone just leave me alone?” she asked.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Get your nose out of my business,” she said.

I sat on the log a few feet from where she leaned against it. I picked up a rock, threw it as far into the lake as I could. It splashed. I picked up another rock.

“Boys throw rocks into lakes,” she said.

“So do girls,” I countered.

“Mostly boys.”

I put the rock down.

"Does making other people feel worse make you feel better?" I asked.

"Of course it does." She picked up a rock and tossed it a few feet from the shore, not really trying. "I mean, not for long. Only works for a little while."

I threw another rock, more softly this time. She threw another rock, as far as she could.

"What's the point of all this?" Daidi asked. "We go and dig up the cage, and then the witches destroy it, and Haim and I never get to use magic ever again because we saved three people's lives. What the rot sense does that make?"

"Almost none," I said.

"And Hex says she doesn't want me to join the Ilthurians. I asked her, a couple nights ago. Was thinking about doing the same thing she did."

"What?" I asked, surprised.

"She wants me to be a witch."

"Are you two …" I couldn't come up with a good way to put it.

"I love her and it's stupid and I wish I didn't and I can't help it and she doesn't love me back."

"Did she say so?" I asked.

"You can't just ask something like that," Daidi said. "You can't just tell people you love them."

"That's stupid," I said.

"Oh, then you've told Araneigh how you feel?" Daidi snapped back.

I threw a rock, meekly. "No," I agreed.

Daidi stood up. "Alright, I'll come back to the group. And we'll march into the woods and find the only thing that ever would have let me use magic again so the witches can destroy it."

We walked a few feet.

"And before you say anything," she said, "yeah, yeah, I know some of the witches say this stupid blight curse is gonna wear off and so I shouldn't worry, but you would too and you know it."

The cage was gone. Henomi and Daidi and I all scoured the area and wracked our brains, but we were certain we were in the right place. Fallen fir tree. Piled dirt and leaves and branches. No cage.

"Where'd you go this morning?" Haim asked, confronting Daidi.

"Me?" Daidi shouted, hysterical. "I snuck off and stole the cage and hid it somewhere."

"Really?" Haim asked.

"No!" Daidi shouted. She pounded her fists against Haim's chest. "No! I didn't do that! Because! I'm! Not! Terrible!"

I sat on the ground in despair. I didn't know how to calm Daidi down

or to get everyone to leave her alone. I wasn't even entirely certain I believed her.

"There's no ley here," I said, after a long moment.

"What?" Haim asked.

"She's right," Araneigh said. I got that warm sensation I felt whenever anyone used "she" to refer to me. "There's no ley at all. There was ley at the lake, and little bits of it most of the walk. There's none here now."

"The cage hasn't been gone long, then," Dam Lament said. "It probably absorbed all the power in the area, and that power hasn't returned yet."

All of us whelps who'd decided to bury the sapling cage looked at one another, guilty.

"We didn't know it would keep working once we buried it," Daidi said.

"I'm not here to punish you," Lament said. "I'm here to solve problems."

"So what do we do?" I asked. "How do we track it down?" I didn't like the idea of returning to Summerhome empty-handed. I also just didn't like the idea of returning to Summerhome.

"We don't," Lament said. "We're not going to find the cage. We're going to Oldking."

"What?" I asked. Lane was in Oldking.

"It was written in the stars last night. The rest of the Order reached out to us. It isn't safe in Summerhome, so we're splitting up. Dam Willow and a small handful of volunteers are going to hold off the knights at Summerhome as long as they can. The bulk of our strength is scattering, but a few covens are going to hide in the shadow of King Sallow's castle in Oldking. It's where the Ilthurians and the rest of the rebels are right now."

"I get it," I said. "If the Duchess takes Oldking …"

"She wipes out the resistance and takes the throne," Araneigh said.

"And where Helte goes …" Haim started.

"The blighters go too," I said.

Oldking was a strange city. For starters, there was King Sallow's castle. Its proper name was Cekon Keep, but no one called it that. Once upon a time, it had been a stone keep at the top of a mountain that overlooked the sea. Over a thousand years, workers had carved the sides of the mountain into sheer stone cliffs. By King Sallow's time, the castle was a single spire that stood in defiance of the sky, in defiance of the waves that crashed against it, in defiance of the town that had sprung up in its long shadow.

Now the castle was empty, of course.

The town wasn't, though. The town was thriving on the wide plains and beaches around the castle. Galleons stood at port, smoke drifted up from the tall chimneys of forges and mills, and we passed dozens of

merchants on their way to and from the city as we approached.

We stopped at a roadhouse on the far outskirts of town. A man with no teeth traded us a mule and cart and disguises for our gold. I put on an ill-fitting brown tunic and worse-fitting boots and immediately smelled like mildew, but it was better to smell like mildew than to be tried for witchcraft.

There were no gates and no guards, but the city was far from unguarded. Everywhere I looked, I saw knights and guard patrols. Beggars and street merchants alike hid in alleys whenever they passed, terrified.

The city was a labyrinth of streets. Dam Rose seemed as lost as the rest of us, but Dam Lament led us confidently into the city and through its crowds.

Buildings of brick crowded against others of rough-hewn lumber while structures of stone climbed toward the sky. Oldking was a city grown by a thousand years of people. Walking through it, I loved it for that, the same as I loved the forest: it was chaotic.

Lament led us closer and closer to the foot of the castle, and the houses got progressively grander. It didn't seem like the part of town witches would stay in. There were fountains in the public squares with clear water running in them. There was glass in the windows. The people we passed were dressed in finery the like of which I'd only seen on rich foreigners in Port Cek—linen and wool woven in gaudy colors and patterns. The further we walked into rich neighborhoods, the more that people took an interest in the motley traders we appeared to be.

We finally stopped in front of a narrow, towering mansion. There were two separate front doors, each taller than I could reach and wider than my outstretched arms, set into stone arches adorned with gargoyles ten feet apart from one another. A single blue glass window in the shape of a diamond sat between them. The house backed up to the castle rock itself.

"We can't linger, not where people can see us," Lament said, opening one of the doors onto darkness. We rushed through, pushing the cart, leaving the mule tied outside.

The ceiling of the entrance hall was a full four stories above us, and the only light filtered down from an ornate stained glass scene set near the top of the wall. A witch from our covenant waited for us inside and conferred with Lament and Rose.

"It's safe here," Rose said to us. "You can change back." She caught my eye, however, and gave a slight shake of her head. We were safe from outside eyes, but it wasn't safe for me to change in front of other witches. Maybe I'd never be safe.

I threw on my cloak over my merchant clothes while everyone else stripped down and put on their dresses and skirts. The other witch looked

at me curiously, without emotion.

She led the way up the stairs. Each floor we passed was brighter and brighter. The top floor was almost entirely stained glass windows. Each depicted a forest with beastheaded people hunting human-headed animals.

Araneigh stared.

"Welcome, welcome," a voice said. I turned and saw a person of ambiguous gender and breathtaking, ageless beauty. Every time I looked at them, they looked subtly different. This time more masculine, this time more feminine. This time their skin seemed a shade darker, this time a shade lighter. They wore a simple red cloak that cut tight to their figure. "Welcome to my home."

"Palia," Araneigh said, staring at our host. "You must be Palia. The dryad."

The dryad smiled. "And you must be Araneigh," they said.

"But what are you doing here, living in the city?" she asked.

"I could tell you it's so that I can keep an eye on the empty throne, or to maintain spies in the merchant houses. I could tell you I'm doing my best to keep the world alive from inside the belly of the civilization that threatens it. None of that would be lies, but it wouldn't be the truth."

"What's the truth?" Araneigh asked.

"I like it here," Palia said. "Now, come. The others are already assembled and arguing."

"Oh good," Lament said, sarcastically. "I'd hate to miss any of the arguing."

"What are those apprentices doing here?" a man wearing the richly dyed robes of a merchant asked as soon as we walked into the meeting.

The grand dining room was a prism of light, since the entire ceiling and one entire wall were ornate stained glass. Seven people sat at the table: an Ilthurian knight, Dam Alectoria, a brigand, a nobleman, a noblewoman, and two merchants. At least thirty people crowded into the room behind them, including the rest of our coven and both Ilthura Espen and Ilthura Natal. It was hard to imagine such people sharing a table, let alone working together as allies. But there they were.

"They're not apprentices, not yet," Dam Alectoria said, the child's casket sitting next to her as always. "Whelps, still."

"What are they doing here?"

"They've been involved since the beginning," Dam Ilma said. "They've fought and lost blood fighting the blight, and they've earned the right to be present."

I was terrified of Dam Ilma, doubly so since she'd sprouted claws, but hearing her stand up for us filled me with pride.

“Then they belong,” said the seated Ilthurian knight, almost skeletal in a brown tabard. With his thin white hair, a thin white beard, and deeply wrinkled medium brown skin, he looked to be a hundred. “If they’ve fought the blighters, they belong.”

“All of this talk of blight,” one of the merchants said. She was probably in her thirties, as short as Henomi. Her arms were covered up and down in sailor tattoos like my dads’. “I don’t give one whit about the blight. Turn every tree in Cekon cold and I don’t care. I care about Helte. I care about stopping the Duchess.”

“It’s tied together,” the elderly Ilthurian said. He paused to catch his breath, then took a long draught from a glass of wine. I’d heard the Ilthurians had no formal leadership, but it seemed like the elders were most likely to speak for them, the same as us witches. “We have reports that she’s drawing on power, great magical power.”

“She knows things she cannot know, has heard and seen things she cannot have heard or seen,” the noblewoman said. “My husband would never have sworn fealty to her, if it weren’t for that.”

“Here in the highlands, knights are running wild,” the brigand said. She was the youngest person seated at the table, probably not yet twenty, but she was an imposing figure of muscle and armor. Her bottom teeth were filed to points, and on her brow, she had tattooed some rune I didn’t recognize. “They’re all stirred up, killing peasants, blaming them for witchcraft. Worse, children are going missing. They walk into the colddead and never return, it’s said. White wyrms, it’s said. We’re spread thin trying to know the truth of it.”

“Up north, the blight has spread through the forests,” the other merchant said. He wore a fine white tunic and a large number of scarves in what I assumed was a northern style. “Game is sparse. Hunters are hungry. Woodsmen are hungry. Then the knights, those blasted tax knights, come in with free bread for everyone. Next thing you know, every out-of-work son and daughter is off to join their ranks. It’s not a coincidence.”

“Stopping the blight is the key to stopping Helte,” Alectoria said. “Simple as that.”

“Killing Helte is the key to stopping Helte,” the nobleman said. He was arrogant, with a pencil mustache and eyes that never stayed focused on anyone he spoke to. “Might be the key to stopping the blight, too.”

It was Baron Ede, I realized. I recognized him from the portraits, having grown up in his barony. I’d never even seen him in person, and now I was in a meeting with him, almost his equal.

“Our scouts say she’ll be here in three weeks,” the Ilthurian skeleton said. “How are preparations?”

“Not going well,” the northern merchant said. “All our reports say she’s guarded by magic. There are some matters that will be almost impossible without our friends from the Order of the Vine.”

“Killing her isn’t the solution,” Alectoria said.

“The Order of the Vine never thinks political action is the solution,” the knight said.

“And the Ilthurians never think about anything but their desire to destroy every vestige of authority,” Alectoria shot back. “If you kill Duchess Helte, you don’t even stop her First Men, let alone the blighters. The whole country will fall into chaos, and the blighters and First Men will step in to restore order. You’ll make a martyr.”

“What does the Order of the Vine propose?” the noblewoman asked.

“Help us stop the blight.”

“You don’t know how,” the Ilthurian said.

“We destroyed a major base of their operations.”

“And yet the blight spreads, Helte grows more powerful, and there are rumors of demons and wyrms running wild over the land.”

“We just need more time, and more resources. We need your help.”

“We’re with you,” the brigand said. “The monsters seem to haunt the blighted forests. Stopping them is the most pressing priority.”

“We don’t have time,” the noblewoman said. If the other noble was Baron Ede, then she must be Rina of Keikan, Baron Keikan’s wife. “Helte controls half the baronies in Cekon. Most of the brotherhoods have sworn fealty … only the Knights of the King’s Tower hold out. She’s on her way here. If she makes a claim on the throne, the rest of the barons will bow to her rather than risk starting a war they can’t win.”

“I’ll resist,” Baron Ede said.

“You’ll lose,” Rina responded.

“I don’t care.”

“You’ll let your peasants bow to you, but won’t turn around and bow to a queen?” the Ilthurian knight taunted.

“King Sallow was a tyrant. His mother before him was a tyrant. You have to go three generations before her to find a monarch who wasn’t. The throne is better empty. I am not a tyrant.”

“Hypocrisy,” the Ilthurian said.

“Maybe,” Baron Ede replied. “Regardless, I am here in this room planning an assassination alongside you. I hope we are able to keep the discussion civil.”

The knight took another draught of wine. Feet shuffled. Someone coughed.

“Give us until she arrives,” Alectoria said.

“Pardon?” Ede asked.

“Your scouts say three weeks. Give us three weeks. Back us for three weeks, with whatever you can spare from your preparations. We’ll root out the blighters and destroy Helte’s source of power. Avert civil war.”

The knight audibly scoffed. “You won’t succeed.”

“If we don’t succeed, we’ll help you kill her,” Alectoria said.

“Even if it starts a war?”

Alectoria sighed. “Even if it starts a war.”

The doors to the room burst open and Dam Willow strode in, filthy with grime and blood.

“Dam Willow, to what do we owe the pleasure?” the Ilthurian asked, clearly facetious.

“Summerhome has fallen,” she said to Dam Alectoria. “Blackcliff has fallen,” she said to the gathered council. “I flew straight here.”

“How many of our people …” Dam Alectoria asked, trailing off.

Dam Willow shook her head. “Ten of us dead. They didn’t just kill witches, either. Our sisters died to help most of the population escape. But Blackcliff is home to no one now. No one but ghosts.”

→ TWENTY-FOUR ←

The meeting didn't last much longer. The nobles and the merchants left by different doors, but the Ilthurians, brigands, and witches were all staying in Palia's manor.

Dam Willow and a few of the other crones remained in the meeting room, discussing the attack on Summerhome. Dam Willow looked exhausted and distraught, and I didn't want to disturb the crones, but I also couldn't stand to wait any longer. I'd been trying to track her down for way too long, to ask her about the spell Dam Catkin had used.

"Not now, whelp," Ilma said as I approached, not bothering to look my way.

"But—" I started.

"Not. Now," Ilma repeated. "I've told Dam Willow about your condition, and she will get to you when she has the chance." I left.

I paced by the front doors, my heels clacking on the marble tile. Anger coursed through me. How dare Ilma tell Dam Willow? Araneigh squatted on her haunches in the middle of the floor, keeping me company.

"I can't believe Palia lives in the city," Araneigh said after a while.

"You've never met her?" I asked. Then I thought that over. "Him?"

"My father says 'they' or 'them' when he talks about Palia. But then again, at least half of what my father says makes no sense at all," Araneigh said. "And nope, I've never met them. I think maybe the two of them had a falling out? I don't know."

"Where's the third dryad?" I asked. "You said there are three left. Your dad, Palia, and?"

"Equo. She's … she doesn't like people, really. I grew up with her kind of as an aunt. But … okay, so you know all those weird hunting scenes? Upstairs here and in my dad's house?"

"Yeah."

"That's what the dryads used to do. Hunt people. I guess they still do it, sometimes. Like, people who need to be hunted. But I think Equo is the

only one who does it the old way."

"What, she turns them into human-headed animals and chases them through the forest?"

"Yeah," Araneigh said.

I shuddered involuntarily.

"You know what he told me, growing up? He said, 'The world reveals itself darker and deeper each day you stare into it.'"

"It does, doesn't it?"

We waited in the entryway for another fifteen minutes. Dozens of people came and went, including all of the crones Dam Willow had been talking to. I was ready to give up when Araneigh shouted and ran to the blue window that looked out onto the street. I followed her.

Dam Willow walked down the street in quite a hurry. She had changed into a simple gray dress and a hood, presumably to walk unmolested through the city, but there was no mistaking her gait.

"How does she do that?" I asked.

"I mean, she can fly," Araneigh said. "But I think she just went out a side door or something."

"I wonder why she isn't staying with the rest of us," I said. I turned around to face Araneigh. Her dress was half over her head.

"Ditch the cloak," she said, putting on the merchant disguise she'd worn into the city. "We'll go after her."

The crowd parted around Dam Willow like water over a ship's prow, while Araneigh and I were caught in the wake. More than once, we lost her entirely for minutes at a time.

Over the course of an hour, we walked across most of the city. Eventually we reached the docks and saw Dam Willow walk into a tiny inn, cleaner and better-maintained than any of the other buildings nearby. We rushed after her, only to be caught up in a throng of dockhands, sailors, fishers, and urchins who crowded the streets.

"I bet it's a spell," Araneigh said. "I bet the same as she pushed through the crowd no problem, she's slowed down anyone who might follow her."

"Yeah, but we're just trying to ask her something!"

"She doesn't know that."

By the time we walked into the inn, she was nowhere to be seen.

The barkeep, a man in his mid-twenties with an air of the sea about him, refused to tell us about the woman who'd just come in or where we could find her.

"Our customers pay gold for their privacy," he said. "We keep their gold and we keep their privacy."

"Well, can we just go upstairs and knock on doors or something?" I asked.

“Absolutely not. Leave before I call for someone to escort you out.”

We left.

“You know,” Araneigh said as I led her around to the side of the building, “if they’d actually taught us any magic, we could just disguise ourselves as guests or go invisible or something.”

“Sure, but we can also just climb this lattice,” I said.

“Huh?”

Vines decorated the side of the building, leading up to a balcony that ran the length of the building, with doors and windows to each room. I started up the wooden lattice. It was flimsy, but it held my weight.

All those mornings of practice with spears and axes had made me stronger than I’d ever been, and it was easy to pull myself up onto the balcony. Araneigh climbed right up after me and we peeked through the inn’s windows.

One room all the way at the back of the building had its curtains drawn. I peered through the narrowest crack and saw Dam Willow in front of a mirror.

I almost knocked on the balcony door, but suspicion stayed my hand. There was a man in the room with her, on the bed, with bloody bandages across his chest. He was young, pale from blood loss, and he wasn’t moving. His tunic—red and unadorned—lay draped across a nearby chair. A Tower Knight. Why was Dam Willow healing a Tower Knight?

I let my eyes drift out of focus for a moment. Less ley flowed through the room than I would have expected. What little there was congregated around Dam Willow herself.

Dam Willow took a leather pouch from under her robe and set it on the table. She drew out a pendant—a small bone, dipped in gold, on a gold chain—and put it on.

Immediately, the ley scattered as though the pendant—or Dam Willow herself—repelled it. Next to me at the window, Araneigh held her hand over her mouth to stifle a gasp.

Dam Willow opened a wardrobe and a rainbow of light filled the room. She took out a sapling cage and placed it on the bedside table. It was the whelps’ sapling cage, the one that had healed me. The one I had buried. The skull inside stared at us, grinning forever in death.

Dam Willow had heard us talk about where we buried the cage. She could fly. She must have gone to get it herself, before us. But why?

She pulled off the man’s bandages and ran her hands over his wounds. The rainbow light flared as she drew power from the sapling, but the color drained away wherever it approached the necklace. It was shielding her. It must be how she managed to use cage magic without destroying her ability to absorb ley.

His color returned and his skin stitched together. He gasped, then put his hands to his chest as though it were an illusion. I'd felt the same shock myself.

The knight stood up and dressed, thanking Dam Willow profusely, taking her hand in both of his to shake it. He talked to Dam Willow for a while, excitedly, quickly, but I couldn't hear the conversation through the glass. Then he left.

Dam Willow returned her pendant to its pouch. She clutched the cage close to her chest with one arm, held aloft an animal bone with the other, mumbled something, and disappeared into thin air.

"We have to tell the dams," Araneigh said.

"We can't trust them," I argued.

"Even Alectoria? Lament? If we can't trust our own coven—"

"We can tell the dams when we know better what's going on, so we know who to trust."

"What do you propose?" Araneigh asked.

"I want to know why she healed a Tower Knight. It just so happens that I know a Tower Knight. Well, an apprentice. Well, an apprentice-to-be or whatever they call it. Squire?"

"We've got to tell the other whelps, at least," Araneigh said. "And … I really think we need to tell Lament and Rose. Maybe we can't trust the crones, but I trust Dams Lament and Rose more than I trust myself."

"Alright," I said. "You go back to Palia's and tell people what we know so far. I'll find Lane and meet up with you later."

"When?"

I looked at the sun. It was mid-afternoon. "Midnight," I said. "I'll come back by midnight, whether I find Lane or not."

"Good luck," Araneigh said. She hugged me, and I kissed her awkwardly on the cheek, and she kissed me awkwardly on the cheek back, then she ran off.

Only two witches knew the ritual I needed. One of them was missing. The other was a blighter.

The sign over the door, carved into the granite, read: "Dead City. Pay your respects."

Dead City was a tavern someone had set up inside a mausoleum, as it turned out. An old woman played violin in the corner, her back up against a wall of graves, her eyes shut as she played a funereal song. Lane's letter had said to look for her here.

A dozen patrons sat at long stone tables, drinking quietly from mugs, lost in the song. None of them were Lane. None of them were even knights, unless they were out of uniform. Most looked like sailors, maybe even pirates.

“Oi, merchant girl,” a man three times my age called from his table, staring lecherously at me. “What are you selling today?”

Everyone in the room but the violinist laughed and leered. Being mistaken for a girl had never felt so dangerous. I wanted to back out of there and never come back. Why would Lane frequent such a place?

I thought about the bravery of my sisters in the Order. I thought about Dam Rose walking out into the road to confront those knights.

“Not selling anything,” I said. “I’m looking for my friend. Lane of the Lead and the Tower.”

“If you’re looking for a friend,” the man said, “I could be your—”

He didn’t finish his sentence, because I pulled the axe out from under my cloak and started toward him with fire in my eyes.

I wasn’t sure what I was planning on doing, but fortunately, whatever it was, I didn’t have to do it.

He put his hands in the air. “Hey, I didn’t mean anything by it,” he said. The rest of the bar laughed again. This time, they were laughing at him and not at me.

A sense of power flooded through me. Action, words, and magic are equal, they’d told me. Any of them could be dangerous, I realized. Any power could be seductive.

I slid my axe back through the loop on my belt and pulled my cloak over it.

“I know the girl. Lane’s here most nights,” another man said, kindly. “They all come in shortly after sundown.”

I nodded. Sunset was less than an hour away.

“Have a drink with us, till then?” He gestured to a seat at his table with three other sailors.

“I’ll take water,” I answered, sitting.

“What brings a youth like you into Oldking?” he asked, after retrieving a pitcher of water and a clay mug from the unattended bar. “Your accent is lowland. Maybe Port Cek? But you’re not a sailor, and I don’t know that you’re a merchant, either.”

“Ledston,” I said. “I’m Lane’s friend from home.” The best lies are based on truths. “It’s not safe there, though, not anymore. Brigands and knights and rumors of worse. Rumors of demons.”

“Just three different sorts of demons. Brigands are demons, knights are demons, demons are demons,” the man said, lifting a glass. “To the comfort of old friends, then.”

I raised my glass, then took a drink. The four sailors told me stories. Even the seas weren’t safe from the rumors of war. The barbarian king of Gehl had been raiding to the north, and pirates flying his red-streaked white flag were harassing ships all along the coast. Half the sailors were

convinced the Duchess would deal with him once she took the throne. The other half were convinced that she'd put him up to it. Frightened people were easier to rule.

Not long later, the Knights of the King's Tower flooded into Dead City, a sea of red tabards and gray armor. I couldn't see Lane in the crowd, but that didn't mean she wasn't there. Every available seat was taken in a moment. A barkeep and three servers appeared from a door leading to an inner crypt and started serving wine.

"To the dead," each of the knights announced, holding up glasses and mugs and drinking horns. The sailors joined in. I raised my water again.

Then everyone in the room emptied their drinks onto the stone floor. I followed suit, confused.

The red wine ran like blood into drains in the floor, presumably into crypts below.

More wine was served and this time, the knights drank it. I stood up to try to find Lane.

"Lorel!" Lane shouted. I turned around just in time to see Lane barrel into me. I staggered back as she hugged me.

"I stayed in Ledston until the coming war drove us all out as refugees," I whispered into her ear.

"Everyone, meet Lorel," Lane said, turning to the crowd. Not very many people were paying attention, but some were. "Lorel of the Lead. She's like a sister to me."

A few knights raised their wine in my direction.

"You took my advice?" Lane asked. "You ran?"

"Not quite," I said. "Can we go somewhere to talk?"

I wasn't suggesting a tomb, but a tomb is where we ended up. Lane led me through the back door into the crypts. She took a lantern down off the wall, led me through a maze, and soon we were in a stone room dominated by three sarcophagi that looked as old as a mountain. Lane hopped onto one and sat.

"You're so muscly!" she said. "You ran off to become a girl and look at you now."

"Look in the mirror," I replied. Lane had grown. She likely would never be as tall as me, but she wasn't the runt she'd been only a few months prior. She'd put on muscle, a lot of it.

"So what do you mean not really, about running away?"

I took a deep breath. "I don't think I can tell you everything," I said. "But … I'm still with the Order of the Vine. I haven't run away."

"The witches are in the city?" Lane asked, looking concerned.

"That …" I stammered, "that's what I probably shouldn't tell you."

"Lorel, you're my best friend. You also basically saved my life. I'm not

going to betray your trust."

I told her everything. I told her everything that had happened since joining the witches, about the other whelps, about helping Hex escape. About all the running, all the fighting. Talking with her, I felt emotions tumbling out, emotions I hadn't even realized I had.

"Wait, so you kissed someone?" she asked, once I was done.

"That's the part you focused on?" I asked. "But … um … yeah."

"That's so great!"

I blushed.

"Anyway," she said, tapping her heels against the sarcophagus, "I'll trade bones with you. It's the least I can do."

"Thanks," I said. "Araneigh already offered, though."

"Yeah, but I'm your best friend," Lane countered.

I didn't want to argue about that, about any of it.

"It's a moot point," I said, "because Dam Willow's the only one who knows the ritual, and she's a blighter."

"Yeah, okay, that's fair."

"Are the Tower Knights working with the blighters?"

"No!" Lane said. "Well, I wouldn't honestly know. It sounds like Sir Taelin is. I bet that's who you saw. He got injured on patrol, he almost died. Then he showed up to dinner tonight looking like a man reborn, and he's out there in the common room right now getting drunk."

"Where was his patrol? Who attacked him?"

"I mean, they don't tell us anything," Lane said. She had a half smile on her face I'd seen a thousand times before. It was so familiar that I missed her desperately, all of a sudden, even though she was right there with me.

"So where was it?"

"He was out in the highlands, a ways west of here. Small town, used to be bandit-controlled."

"Set Porlock?"

"Yeah, how'd you know that?"

"That's one of the closest towns to where Dam Willow lives."

"Oh," Lane said. "Oh. That's bad."

"Is your whole brotherhood working with the blighters, do you think?"

"I don't think so? Taelin's kind of a wild one. Acts on his own a lot. And you say the blighters are helping Helte, but we're the only knights left that aren't backing Helte."

"Besides the Ilthurians."

Lane sneered. "The only *real* knights. The Ilthurians are just brigands who happen to wear tabards."

I didn't want to argue with her. I did anyway. "Since when do you hate

brigands?"

"I'm a knight now."

"So are Ilthurians."

"Okay, whatever."

We'd only spent a few months apart, but the past few months were far and away the longest of my life.

"We should tell Sir Hamal," Lane said. "The First Knight of the King's Tower. He's honest to a fault. I think if you took away his honor, he'd just be an empty suit of armor. He'll listen, at least about the blighters. There's no way he'd join in a revolution. But he would try to stop the blighters, especially if they're infiltrating his ranks."

"He won't listen to squires and whelps, I bet," I said.

"That's true."

"I … would he listen to witches?"

"Wow. I don't know. I mean, he might? Most everyone still thinks you all are the blighters, though. And if you show your faces—" Lane didn't finish the thought.

"If he doesn't believe us, he'll kill us."

"Yeah. He'll kill you."

I put my hand on the stone lid of the grave. "Well," I said, "this isn't the worst place to spend eternity."

TWENTY-FIVE

Lane was right—Sir Hamal was honest to a fault. He wouldn't agree to let witches come to his hall skulking in disguise or darkness. We marched through the streets of Oldking, all of us in our black dresses and our cloaks, while his knights rode as our guards. Or our captors. Or both, I guess.

The witches had agreed to the meeting much faster than I'd expected them to when I'd returned late the night before and told them the plan. I had come around, in the end, on the need to tell the crones. Only Dam Lament had argued against it, but not for long. It was too late for half measures, Dam Ilma had said. If Dam Willow was a blighter, she was likely the head blighter. And if she *was* the head blighter, then we were going to need all the help we could get.

No one tried to stop us in the street, but we saw knights of every brotherhood watching us as we walked. More menacing still, I saw some of the brigands we'd met with at Palia's hall. No doubt they weren't happy with us meeting with the knights.

The Hall of the King's Tower was almost a castle in its own right, guarding the only entrance to the castle mountain. According to Lane, there was a single lift inside the mountain that ran up to King Sallow's castle above.

Lane wasn't with us as we walked through the street, unfortunately. I could have used her presence, her reassurance.

I had Araneigh with me, though. And Haim. And Daidi, and Henomi. And Rose. And Lament. And two dozen more witches besides. And there was ley in Oldking. Ley was strange, here in the city. Where most ley in the countryside moved in streams or mists, the ley here in the city was like ropes and threads, like wisps of hair caught on the wind.

I walked under the black iron portcullis, but I wasn't afraid. Not even when they took our weapons. I'd seen Dam Lament kill five people with a single spell.

We met in the great hall. At the far end, a throne sat empty. It wasn't the Cekon throne, of course. That lay empty a thousand feet above our heads.

A young knight stood next to the throne, in a simple vest of brigandine and a red tunic. I'd spent so long in the company of people without leaders—without traditional leaders, at least—yet I knew right off that this must be Sir Hamal, the First Knight of the King's Tower. It was evident from his confidence, from the deference shown by every one of his underlings.

It turned an otherwise handsome man ugly.

Dams Alectoria and Ilma walked up to him, stopping a few paces away. There was some kind of battle going on, a battle of etiquette I didn't understand. The knight stared at the witches, the witches stared at the knight.

"Welcome, Dam Ilma of the Vine," the knight said. By speaking first, he'd lost, I was pretty sure. "Welcome, Dam Alectoria of the Vine. You and yours are welcome in the Hall of the King's Tower."

"Thank you, Sir Hamal of the Tower," Dam Alectoria said.

Squires came in with chairs. Lane was with them. Soon, we sat in a wide circle. Thirty knights on one side, thirty witches on the other. The squires started to file out of the room.

"Lane should join us," I said.

The knights looked aghast that I spoke. To be fair, I was a little aghast myself.

"What?" Sir Hamal asked.

Lane caught my eye and shook her head. It was too late, though. "I would request that Lane of the Lead and the Tower join us."

Sir Hamal laughed. I couldn't get a read on him. "Lane, get yourself a chair."

"Yes, sir," Lane said. The circle opened and she sat down.

"The kingdom is falling apart," Dam Alectoria said. "Blight and the machinations of people mad for power."

Sir Hamal nodded.

"It's no secret that Duchess Helte will be here in a few weeks' time. It's no secret that she plans to lay claim to the throne."

"Let me save us both a lot of time," Sir Hamal said. "The Knights of the King's Tower are neutral in all internal political affairs. We serve the kingdom, whether or not anyone sits on its throne."

"There will be a war," Dam Ilma hissed. "And you don't care."

"I do care. I care deeply. And yet, I'm honor-bound to stay neutral."

"We all seek balance in our own ways," Dam Alectoria conceded.

"We're not here to discuss politics. We're here to discuss the blight.

Two of your …" he wracked his brain for the right word, "whelps have made a claim implicating one of yours and one of ours. Yes?"

"Whelp Araneigh and Whelp Lorel have made that claim, yes."

"Tell us what you saw," Sir Hamal said.

I looked at Alectoria, who nodded. I told the assembled crowd what I'd seen.

After I spoke, Sir Hamal raised up and slammed his fist on the arm of his chair three times. A side door opened and a knight walked in. Sir Taelin. He was unarmed and unarmored, but unbound and unescorted. He stood in the center of the circle.

"Sir Taelin, were you treated for your wounds by Dam Willow of the Order of the Vine?" Sir Hamal asked.

"I was."

"By what means were you healed?"

"Salves and incantations. Witchcraft."

"Not by the use of blight magic?"

"I'm not versed in the various forms of witchcraft."

"Was there a golden cage in the room with you, containing a skull and a glowing rainbow tree?"

"Not to my recollection."

"Do you think you might have remembered it, if there had been a golden cage holding a skull and a glowing rainbow tree?"

"Yes, sir."

"So was there such a thing or not?"

"No, sir, there was not."

Dam Ilma stood up and walked toward the man. I'd grown used to her, half bird and half woman, but here in the city among the knights, her monstrosity had never felt more obvious.

"There's a spell that could reach the truth of this quick enough," she said. She ran one claw along Sir Taelin's cheek. He flinched, not in fear, but in revulsion. "In our study of blight, we've run across a way to undo its workings. It would be a simple enough thing to cast this spell on this young man. If he hasn't been healed by blight, he'll feel nothing. Nothing will happen. If he has, the wounds will return. They'll return worse. They'll likely kill him."

"Keep your spells off of me, crone," Taelin said. His revulsion was now cut by fear. His eyes were wide with it.

"I will allow it," Sir Hamal said.

"Sir," Taelin protested. "It could be a trick. It could just be a spell that undoes healing, any healing."

"I'm sure our guests have more honor than that."

"Oh, Great Mother," Ilma intoned, her voice dropping an octave. Thin

tendrils of ley flooded into her mouth like sticks caught in a whirlpool. Most spells were muttered, if they were vocalized at all. Ilma was putting on a show. “All creatures must live their lives, all creatures must walk on the earth, all creatures must be of the earth.”

As though a cloud had cut off the sun, the chamber went dim.

“Great Mother,” Ilma said, her voice now many voices all at once, “as the cat cleans its fur, clean this man. As the stream breaks rocks, break—”

“Wait!” Sir Taelin shouted.

Ilma stopped chanting. The light returned.

“There was a sapling in a cage, okay?” Sir Taelin said. “She healed me with a stupid golden cage. How was I to know that was blight?”

“Did you?” Sir Hamal asked.

Something inside Sir Taelin snapped. “Yes. To rot with you all, yes. I knew Dam Willow is a cage magician. Anyone whose eyes are open knows she’s a cage magician. The cages are no blight. It’s the future of magic. Out of the hands of these … these … witches. Duchess Helte is going to be our queen, and she will break the Order of the Vine, and she will bring peace to Cekon. Every rotting brotherhood knows it but us.”

“Take him out of here,” Sir Hamal said, his head heavy. “Strip him of his armor, weapons, and tabard and confine him to his quarters.”

Dam Ilma retook her seat.

“Do you believe us now?” Dam Alectoria asked.

“Our intelligence says Dam Willow lives west of here,” Sir Hamal said instead of answering, “in a highland forest.”

“That’s correct.”

“That area, those woods, that’s the center of all this madness with monsters and missing children.”

“I doubt that’s a coincidence,” Dam Alectoria said.

“I doubt that too,” Sir Hamal said.

“What now?” Dam Alectoria asked.

“We gather every hand that can swing a blade and we ride with all haste,” Sir Hamal said. “With war on our tongues and death in our eyes, we ride for the forest. We end the monsters, we end the blight, we end Dam Willow.”

“Good,” Dam Alectoria said. “I was afraid we’d have to do it alone.”
The knights escorted us back across town, then stood guard in front of Palia’s home.

Once we were inside, I caught up with the crones as they went up the stairs. “I didn’t know there was a spell to undo blight magic,” I said.

“There isn’t,” Dam Ilma cackled. “We still barely know the first thing about blight magic.”

“But one thing I feel confident about,” Dam Alectoria said, “is that if

we get ahold of that amulet you saw Dam Willow use, the one that let her work blight without harming her ability to use ley? We get that, and we can figure out a way to set Haim and Daidi right and still teach them magic."

"Like you've taught any of the rest of us," I mumbled.

"I swear to the Great Mother, when we were whelps, we had something called patience! Respect!" Dam Alectoria shouted, though she wasn't angry.

"Don't lie to the Great Mother like that," Ilma said, then cackled again.

TWENTY-SIX

The rest of the alliance didn't much like the plan. They didn't like taking resources and people away from their assassination plot to go hunting the blight, and they really didn't like the idea of working with the Tower Knights.

But they needed us. They needed witchcraft to pull off their attack, and they'd certainly need us as allies if a civil war broke out. So they assented.

Less than twenty-four hours after our meeting with the knights, we rode out. We were a sight to see. Every one of the thirty witches rode a black mare. A hundred brigands from eight gangs rode mules and horses or perched on the rooftops of armored wagons. Baron Ede himself came with us, him and his personal guard in gaudy bright velvets. The Tower Knights wore red tabards over their chain and plate armor, looks of grim determination on their faces. The Ilthurians, ragtag in brown, rode on massive warhorses at the rear of the procession.

By the time we reached the outskirts of Oldking, half the city had come out to see us go. Some faces flashed with curiosity, others with malice, others with hope. It would have been impossible to sneak out such a large force—almost five hundred strong, all told—without anyone noticing. And certainly, our enemies noticed too.

Clouds sat thick under the morning sun, a chilly late summer's day. I rode alongside the other whelps, with Dams Lament and Rose our guardians, as always. At first, I was frustrated that I wouldn't be riding with Lane—I had so much to catch up with her about—but then I saw her riding next to a boy close to her age. He was handsome and masculine, with a heavy frame. He already had a mustache and hints of a beard. Lane looked at him like he was the stars and the moon. I was inexplicably jealous, and then I was glad I wasn't riding with them.

Hex and Espen left their fellow Ilthurians several times to ride alongside us. Espen claimed it was because his squire wanted to ride with Daidi, but it was clearly also so he could ride with Dam Lament.

Even in such large numbers, people on horseback riding on roads travel unfathomably faster than witches walking leypaths through the trees. We were expecting to be less than a week on the road. We were also expecting trouble.

The first night, we stopped in a field alongside the road. Witches put up magic tents, brigands and Ilthurians slept under the stars. Baron Ede slept in his carriage, guarded by his retinue, and the Tower Knights set up massive cloth pavilions. A war council convened in the center of the field, but I quickly lost interest as they discussed sentries and patrols. None of the groups trusted the others, which made sense enough.

Apparently, someone learning the trade of banditry is just called a baby. Us whelps and squires and babies got along fine. We didn't have many responsibilities, so we taught each other sports and games we knew. A highland girl—a baby, though she was older than me—taught us "Which man is Mani." We chased each other through the grass, shouting code words and tackling one another, forming loose and temporary teams. Hex won the first round, then the girl who taught us the game won the second.

We played hoop run, we played dead drinker, we played a game that the baron's fourteen-year-old niece insisted didn't have or need a name in which three people hid in trees and the rest of us had to make our way through the forest without getting hit by pinecones. I had a feeling she made the game up on the spot. At first, I felt too old for all this, since it seemed silly, but once I started playing, I had more fun than I'd had in ages.

We played games until the sun was down and the stars were out and we couldn't see each other well enough to play any longer. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been as happy.

Some of us stayed up later, gathering around a fire. Daidi and Hex were there, sitting so close they were like one creature. Araneigh held my hand and ran her fingers lightly up the back of my arm. Haim and the noble girl had hit it off, too, and Henomi made friends with triplet babies. Lane was there. So was her friend. Her boyfriend, it turned out. Astrin of the Heath and the Tower, he introduced himself. The whole time I'd talked with Lane in the crypt, I'd talked about myself. I hadn't asked much about her.

I didn't like him. I didn't want to like him. But I wanted to want to like him, which almost counts. He was just … he was a knight. I couldn't figure out how else to explain it. He was so rotting proper. He pronounced every word so clearly. He doted on Lane like she was a lady. Maybe she was a lady. What did I know anymore? Lane seemed happy with him, though.

“I wish my whole life was like today,” Araneigh said as she started to fall asleep against my shoulder. “Riding horses. Being with new friends and old friends. Playing games.”

From far off, I heard coyotes. Then something answered them. Something bigger. Something with gravel in its throat. But it was so far away. It was tomorrow’s problem.

We fell asleep around the fire. Araneigh curled up against my back, and I held her arm against my chest, and I wasn’t even bothered by how bad all the old men and women snored.

I woke at sunrise, chilly and soaked in dew. Our camp was already alive. Us whelps left the other teenagers and joined the rest of the witches for jam and bread—a rare treat for breakfast, courtesy of our merchant allies.

Any sense of peace didn’t last long. A brigand came over and informed us nervously that two patrols had gone missing the night before. One of brigands, one of Tower Knights. Like as not they were lost or maybe had deserted, he told us. But nothing in his demeanor suggested he believed it.

So most of us waited and fretted, and us whelps whispered tales of monsters we’d seen to the other youth. Haim and Henomi took turns telling the story of how we’d killed a white wyrm. The sun rose higher in the sky while search parties combed the woods.

It was Lament and Alectoria, using magic, who found the bodies. What was left of them. Nine women and men, knights and brigands both, were piled in a midden at the bottom of a gully. Their deaths were clearly the work of swords and arrows, not monsters.

We rode on. The second day was less joyous than the first. Every bird that darted from a tree was cause for alarm. Crones rode at our front and our rear, alongside the best hunters and trackers from every faction. Lament and Rose rode close beside us.

It made no sense, not to me. There were hundreds of us, some of the finest spellcasters and warriors in the country. No monsters or mercenaries would dare attack, not even on a mad would-be queen’s orders.

That evening we stopped early, at the ruins of a giant’s watchtower. The only games we played were the sort we could play sitting in a circle atop the roof of an outbuilding. Mostly, we talked. We told stories about people we’d seen die. Some of us told stories about people we’d helped kill.

I slept cuddled with Araneigh again, but it was more for a mutual sense of safety than it was for joy or for romance.

Still, she kissed me on the back of the neck just as I was falling asleep.

“I’m glad you’re here with me,” she whispered. “It’s too dark tonight.”

I fell asleep happy.

On the fifth day, a stream of refugees found us. Some of them were from Set Porlock: I recognized the barkeep's boy. Lament asked after his mother; he shook his head.

"Demons," a young man told us. "Skeletal men, eight feet tall, draped in rags cut from the skins of people. They came at us in the night. Already, we'd lost everything. Already, we'd been driven from our homes. Then this."

"Those things, they're called bolivor," Dam Alectoria told us all. "They look like men, but they are beasts. Simple and cruel, without language or awareness."

"Another thing that's supposed to just be a legend," Araneigh said.

"How many of these monsters did you see?" Ilthura Natal asked the refugee.

"It was too dark. At least ten."

"Take us to where you were attacked," Ilthura Natal replied. "Anything that can kill can die."

That's how I ended up bored in the middle of a road with the other whelps and squires while almost everyone else went off into the nearby woods to slay a nest full of human-skin-wearing-and-eating demons. Even the baby brigands got to go.

The sun bore down on us, and we were restless.

Ilthura Espen and Hex both stayed. Espen spent the whole time talking with Dam Lament, and eventually I realized they weren't flirting. Not really. They were friends, and they were affectionate, but it wasn't flirting. For some reason that made me feel better.

"We're not a bunch of rotting children," Daidi said. "We should have gotten to go."

"How do you think I feel?" Dam Lament asked. "Watching you lot while everyone else is off fighting."

Just then, a noble's guard atop a nearby carriage gave a warning cry and loosed a bolt into the woods. More soon followed as he and his companions reloaded.

There were only maybe thirty of us from our party left on the road. Nearly twice that number emerged from the forest: tax knights, field knights, knights of orders I couldn't recognize. All of them walked armed, armored, and determined. All of them were looking to hurt us.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“Form a circle,” Lament shouted. “Shields to the outside. Spears just behind them.” We obeyed. Even the stragglers from the other groups obeyed. Lament was a powerful figure.

The crossbowers atop the carriages moved inside the vehicles and kept firing, though to little effect. The tree line was a couple hundred yards from the road, and our heavily armored opponents seemed to be in no hurry to close the gap.

Lament, Rose, Araneigh, and I all stood in a line with our spears. Lane was just in front of me, holding a teardrop-shaped shield nearly as tall as her. Astrin was to her left.

“What do you see here?” Dam Lament asked us.

“There’s no ley,” I said.

“Not much, no,” Lament said. “Either they picked this spot for that reason or they prepared it.”

“There are no bolivor in the woods, are there?” I asked.

“Maybe. Probably not.”

“Those rotting lying peasants.”

“Those rotting lying peasants would have been killed if they didn’t agree to set us up,” Lament said.

“Why aren’t the knights charging us?” I asked. “Our only hope is to hold out until the rest of the force returns. It’s their best move to rush us and get it over with.”

“I assume they’re waiting to see what we’re going to do,” Lament said. “What strange magic we have in store.”

“No,” Araneigh said. “That’s not what’s happening.”

Dam Lament didn’t seem angry at being contradicted, but she was clearly surprised.

“They want us alive,” Araneigh said. “Or some of us.”

“How do you figure?” Lament asked. She wasn’t doubtful. Forever the teacher, she wanted her pupil to explain her thinking.

“When you hunt a predator, you don’t let it think it’s surrounded. It will go down fighting. The same is true in war, from what I’ve learned. You always give the enemy a path by which to retreat, because a rout is a better victory. Running is for prey. But we’re surrounded. They’re coming in slow and careful. No ranged weapons. They’re looking for a surrender. Maybe hostages for negotiation, maybe something worse.”

“You’re probably right,” Lament said.

Araneigh let a hint of a smile cross her face.

The knights stopped about twenty paces away from us. I’d miscalculated. We weren’t outnumbered two-to-one, it was worse than that.

“Lay down your weapons,” a tax knight demanded. He was a giant of a man with a gilded helmet that marked his authority. “Surrender to Her Majesty’s care and be granted mercy.”

“It’s ‘Her Grace,’” Espen shouted.

“What?” The knight looked confused by the idea that we weren’t cowering.

“Duchess Helte is a duchess,” Espen yelled back, clearly enjoying himself. “The proper honorific for a duchess is ‘Her Grace.’ She’s not a queen.”

“What would a Knight of Scum know about honorifics and courtly manners?” the knight responded.

“I mean, it’s pretty simple. I could go over it if you want,” Espen said. A few people on all sides started snickering. “See, right now there’s two levels of nobility. Barons, then above them are dukes. Well, only one duke. And actually, she’s a duchess. It’s weird how those words are gendered. Anyway—”

“Enough!” the man shouted. He took a two-handed sword off his back, drew it from the scabbard, and dropped the scabbard on the ground. He stepped forward.

Ilthura Espen stepped forward, too. All he held was a shield. No, when I looked closely, I saw he also held a rock behind his back.

He was going to die.

“Surrender,” the knight ordered.

“I sort of can’t. Like, even if I wanted to.”

“What do you mean, you can’t?”

More of the tax knight’s own men were laughing at him now.

“It’s kind of a vow. See, I don’t know if you know this about the Ilthurian knights … I figure since you don’t even know how your own side’s stuff works, you probably don’t know much about us. Anyway, we make our own tenets. And just this morning, actually as you all were coming out of the trees, I thought to myself, it’s time for a new tenet. New

tenet is ‘never surrender.’ So … yeah, I kind of can’t.”

“This isn’t going to go well,” I whispered.

“He’s stalling,” Lament said.

In the distance, a horn sounded twice, short and long. Our main force was returning.

One of Baron Ede’s men put a horn to his lips to warn our companions.

“Blow on that horn and you’ll die,” said a knight in a blue tabard with a field of stars.

The Baron’s man blew. Three short blasts.

Everything happened both in slow motion and all at once after that. I’d never been in a battle nearly so large, even in practice. As best as I could understand, the knight in the blue tabard raised his crossbow, only to get hit in the head with a rock and crumple to the ground. Then the commander’s claymore came crashing into Espen’s shield, sundering it and likely breaking Espen’s arm in the process.

Then the circle of enemy knights closed in on us, and Lament shouted for us to break through. So I stabbed with my spear and the shields pushed and blood went a lot of places and bodies shoved against me and we broke through their ranks. But only Araneigh and me. Astrin fell under an axe blow.

In the distance, I heard a roar and our allies charged through the trees. But they were on the other side of the battle from us, and it was clear we were losing, fast.

“Run,” Dam Lament shouted to us across the battle lines. “For the love of the Great Mother, run for the trees!”

I looked at Araneigh. Araneigh looked at me. We didn’t run. We took a step back toward the battle. A woman rushed me, axe in one hand, a club in the other.

When you’re holding a spear and someone rushes you, your only hope is to stab them while they close in. I had a clear shot. I knew how to get her to use her own momentum to impale herself on my spear. I’d done it in practice a hundred times, a thousand times. I was good at it.

I hesitated. I didn’t stab her.

She closed on me, swung the club, and I blacked out.

I woke screaming in pain. I couldn’t see anything. My hands were tied tight with rope. My legs were in irons. From the rattling, the jolting movement, and the noise, I figured I was in a carriage.

“Who is that?” a voice asked, scared. Daidi.

“It’s Lorel,” I said. “Can you see?”

“No. We went after you, all of us. Haim killed the woman who did that to you.”

“Who else is in here?” I asked.

One by one, everyone answered. Araneigh. Haim. Daidi. Henomi. Lane. Hex. Only us youth. And no Astrin. Astrin of the Heath and the Tower was probably dead.

My best friend's boyfriend was probably dead. Soon we might be, too.

I hadn't liked him, and it was funny how little that mattered. He was my best friend's boyfriend, and he was my comrade in the war against the blighters. An ugly sound came out of my throat, just once, just one heave, but I couldn't let myself cry. Not as a matter of principle, just a matter of strategy.

When your life is on the line, you don't always have time for emotion.

That was why I'd been so closed off from my emotions. All my life. Fear. With the Order, it was fear of being found out. Before that, it had been fear of … fear of what it meant to be myself.

It was a strange place to have that sort of epiphany. I figured, if I got the chance, I would sort through those thoughts later.

I was still doing it, thinking about thinking instead of just letting myself feel. But just for the moment, that was okay.

"What happened to everyone else?" Araneigh asked. "Did anyone see?"

"I was only half out when they dragged me off," Haim said. "I think … I think we won. Or we didn't lose. There's no way they won't save us soon."

"Oh, we're counting on them trying," an old man's voice cut in. I didn't recognize it, but whoever he was, he was close. He was in the carriage with us.

I screamed. I screamed and I fought against my chains and I screamed and I screamed. I thought he would hit me, but he didn't. He laughed at me until my voice grew sore and I stopped screaming. In the process, I tasted burlap and realized that rather than simply being blindfolded, there was a bag over my head.

"Helte is going to pay for this," Haim said. "When my father—"

"I don't work for Helte," the man said. "Soon enough, you'll wish I did."

Through the burlap, I saw hints of a bright, rainbow light. A sapling cage. "It's time you slept once more," the man said, and I went out again. The man's singing woke me.

"Some of you for signposts, some of you for stew. All of you will suffer, for children suffer too."

He wasn't casting a spell. He was just singing a little song to himself as he worked.

The bag was pulled off my head and I came face to face with our tormentor. He was average in every possible way. Neither pale nor dark, neither tall nor short. Thick nor thin. I could have seen him a thousand

times before and never have known it. He wore a plain gray shift. A blighter.

We were in a cramped cellar. Roots of trees broke through the stone walls. The only light came from a dim cook fire. The only way in or out that I could see was a plain wooden trapdoor in the ceiling. My friends were tied to posts on either side of me. I must have been the last one to be unhooded.

A witch's cauldron stood on the firepit at the far end of the basement. A wooden spoon as long as my arm stuck out of it, stirring on its own. We were in Dam Willow's cellar. It had to be. There were more posts set against the wall, old and bloody. All those missing children, for all those years.

The man held up a crude bone knife, as though for my inspection. It ran red with blood. "Signpost, signpost, tied to a tree," he sang, then chuckled at his own absurdity. "Signpost, signpost, for everyone to see. No witches live here, no witches live there, no witches an-y-where."

He grabbed my hair and twisted my head to the side. Next to me, Haim was quivering. Blood ran from a crescent moon carved into her cheek.

Someone banged against the outside of the trapdoor in the ceiling. Three slow, loud knocks.

"Don't go anywhere," the torturer smiled. He climbed the steps to the door, opened it, and went out into a bright, rainbow light.

I started shaking. It started as a shiver, then my whole body convulsed. I took shallow, fast breaths.

I was going to die. Sixteen and dead. I'd never learned magic. And worse …

"I don't want to die a boy," I said, sobbing.

"You're not a boy," Araneigh answered.

"You're a girl," Daidi agreed.

"You always have been," Lane said.

As simple as that, in the last moments of my life, I knew they were right.

I'd been so hung up on the idea that only magic could make me a woman. The whole time, though, I'd known what I was. I'd just refused to see it. If I survived, I wouldn't need magic to make me what I already was. Changing my body might be nice. I could think about that, maybe learn how to do it.

Catkin had needed the ritual, to hear Dam Sorrel tell it. And that was fine. But I wasn't Dam Catkin. I was Lorel. The girl. The woman. The witch.

"To rot with dying," I whispered. Then again, louder, my throat sore, I screamed it: "To rot with dying."

The trapdoor opened and the torturer returned.

“Have to hurry now, have to hurry, not to worry now, not to worry, you’ll all be dead before tomorrow.”

He walked up to me, took my chin in his rough, warm hand, and carved a crescent moon into my cheek. It felt like fire. I refused to feel it. I let my eyes go blurry.

There was ley in the room. White and black, twisting in tiny gyres. I didn’t know how to use it, which was maddening. At least the ley was something to focus on instead of the pain.

“I’m going to kill you,” I whispered to my captor when he was done.

“No, you’re not,” the man said. He leaned in and whispered into my ear. “You aren’t capable of it, even if you were free. Your sisters, they could do it. I mean, they won’t get the chance, since they’ll be tied to trees. But you? I saw you fight. You won’t kill anyone.”

I didn’t pause. I didn’t think about it. I turned my face fast, took his nose in my teeth, and ripped.

I tasted blood. I didn’t sever his nose from his head, not completely. He screamed and dropped the knife. I kicked it over to Araneigh. I held the man by the nose while Araneigh dropped to the ground, grabbed the knife, and cut herself free.

The man was right. I didn’t kill him. Araneigh did. She cut his throat as cleanly and coldly as if she were killing a rabbit in a snare.

I could have done it, probably. But I hadn’t needed to. Araneigh cut me loose, then the rest of us.

The Order of the Vine had taught me power after all. Physical power was still power.

As soon as she was free, Henomi threw up. Daidi spat on the corpse of our captor. Lane sank to the ground and hugged her knees and cried. I went to her and held her. She collapsed into me.

“We’re not free yet,” Hex said. “They brought us here, wherever we are, to lure everyone else into a trap. Which means whatever’s above us … is a trap.”

Daidi returned from the far corner of the cellar with a wooden box full of kitchen knives. “Then let’s go muck up their trap.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

When we emerged from the cellar in the cabin, the light of the cages was blinding after the dim underground. Five of them sat on tables, a sixth hung from the ceiling.

It wasn't just the cages that were gilded, either. The last time I'd been in Dam Willow's cabin, it had been well kept but modest. Now, the furniture was velvet and gold-leafed wood, the bed was draped in furs from exotic animals, and gold jewelry hung from a hook on the wall. Only the view from the windows confirmed we were in Dam Willow's cabin.

We could hear the distant sounds of battle: steel on steel, screams of agony.

Daidi ran to the nearest cage, reached between the bars, and ripped out the sapling.

"We could use them," Haim reminded her.

"To rot with these things," Daidi said. She was furious, I realized. Furious that she was cursed.

I saw a glint of white and looked closer at the jewelry on the wall. The amulet hung there, the bone dipped in gold. The amulet that had protected Dam Willow from the curse of blight. It was a finger bone, bleached by the sun. I had no doubt at all it was human. I grabbed it and wrapped its cord around my wrist.

The front door swung open and I looked up as two women in gray walked in. They clearly weren't expecting us to be there. One raised her hands over her head, preparing a spell. Hex threw a knife into her belly. That woman joined the chorus of screaming agony outside. The other blighter wrapped her arm around her and helped her escape.

"Come on," Araneigh said, breaking the paralyzing silence in the wake of the blighters' departure. She went to a second cage, lifted it, and bashed it against the bedpost. Again, again. The bars splayed open far enough for her to reach in and pull out the tree. Lane and Haim and Hex destroyed the rest of the saplings from the cages on the table.

Only one cage remained, hanging from the ceiling more than ten feet above my head. It flickered and pulsed as blighters outside drew on its power.

Then it flashed faster, a glittering crescendo. The sounds of battle outside disappeared, and a violet light shone through the window.

I climbed a bookshelf to get closer to the last cage while Araneigh ran to look outside.

"They're almost here," Araneigh reported. "Dam Lament, Dam Rose. A few others. But some kind of ward's gone up, they can't get through."

I jumped for the cage, ripping it from its hook and falling with it to the floor. Its gold bars were thick and close set and I couldn't get the cage open. Haim picked it up and smashed it on the stone floor, but to no effect. The light of the sapling inside flickered as it powered the violet ward outside.

The door blew off its hinges and Dam Willow strode in. Her goat eyes were wide and shot through with red. Blood spattered her clothes.

Hex threw another knife, but it melted into a pool of iron by the crone's feet.

Haim picked up the cage and smashed it down again. A few of the bars bent inward. I picked it up. I could almost get my hand through.

"Stop," Dam Willow said.

We stopped, every one of us. Only my arm that held the amulet was free to move. I could scarcely breathe.

"What do you think you're doing?"

I lifted the amulet and put the cord over my head. It rested against my heart and I could breathe again. My whole body was sluggish, but once again under my control.

"Stopping you," I said.

"Why?" she asked. Her eyes grew a bit wider when she realized I had a way to resist her magic. "Because I'm evil? Is that it?"

"You are," I said. "We'll never let you help Helte take the throne."

"You ignorant whelp," Dam Willow said, sweetness creeping back into her voice, "I'm not helping Duchess Helte. I'm helping myself. The Duchess, she's useful. For now. She'll unite Cekon, then I'll depose her, and I'll rule. And everyone will be better for it. Everyone."

"But the blight!"

"Progress," she said. "Cage magic kills trees. Yes. So does building houses. Cage magic kills people. So does war, so does winter. So do witches and knights and brigands and angry men and angry women. Snakes kill rats, hawks kill rabbits, and the powerful kill the powerless."

She took a step closer to me as she spoke.

"Raw ley is almost impossible to work," she said, her voice sweet and

thick as honey. “It takes years of study, and even then, a practitioner is subject to the whims of chaos. She must chase the ley. Cage magic is simpler to work, and its power can be stored. How many people have died because no healers were around when they were sick, or the healers didn’t have access to the right sorts of ley at that moment?”

I had no answer for her.

“When Dam Heavens and I made the first cage, we knew we’d started something beautiful. Scary, yes. Dark even. But we are witches. Scary, dark, beautiful? That’s the water we swim in. The Order of the Vine picked the wrong side.”

“The cages are progress because anyone can use them?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Who makes the cages?”

“Clever boy,” she said. That word, “boy,” cut me. “Right now, I do. I’ll teach a few people, but only a few. We have to keep control over all of this somehow,” Dam Willow said. “Put down the cage and join us.”

“You don’t care about helping people,” I said. “You just want control.”

“I don’t *want* control. I don’t *want* power. I *have* it. I know about you,” she continued. “I know what you need. You need a spell, and I’m the only one who can cast it. I have all the power in this situation. Give me the cage. I’ll let you join us, even. If you escaped the basement, I assume you killed my … cook. I’ll need someone to take his place.”

She took another step closer to me. I forced my hand between the bars of the cage, ripping the skin, and grabbed the base of the sapling.

“There’s no ley here,” Dam Willow said. “No magic but cage magic. Your friends can’t help you.”

She reached out for me.

“I don’t care,” I said. “You don’t decide who I am or what I need. And I won’t let you decide who has magic and who doesn’t. Ley runs free. So it takes years to learn to work it. So what? Every witch is each other’s equal. Since ley is free, no witch can put a stranglehold on it. If not enough village healers know how to work it, it’s because of people like you. People like you who crave power, hoard it, demonize people like the rest of us witches who want to keep power diffuse and free and wild. You hunt us. You drive us from our homes. You kill us. You. You, Dam Willow, you.”

I ripped the sapling from the cage and the world flared bright as the ward shattered outside. My body was my own again.

“Nasty child,” she screeched. She wrapped her hand around my throat and lifted me into the air like I weighed nothing at all. I felt the power leave my body, saw traces of ley flow from the dead cage and up into her arm, rejuvenating her.

For a moment, I felt nauseous. Then, somehow, I felt too weak for nausea. My mind fogged over. My vision fogged over. Dimly, I realized that if she choked me much longer, I would die.

Araneigh rushed her first, but the back of Dam Willow's fist sent her flying across the room. Haim and Lane and Hex and Henomi and Daidi rushed over immediately after.

We didn't have magic. We only had each other.

Dam Willow dropped me to deal with the others, and I lay on the ground, too exhausted to move. Too exhausted to see clearly, to think clearly.

Knives found their mark, again and again, but Dam Willow's wounds healed as fast as they appeared.

Witches and knights burst into the room, and spears and swords added their fury to our knives. Little by little, the power went out of Dam Willow. Little by little, an ancient witch died. Not killed by any one of us. Killed by all of us.

When she fell, she lay on the ground with her eyes facing mine. There was no expression on her face. No anger, no malice, no sorrow. Her face was as cold as a blighted tree.

"You can get up," Araneigh said, kneeling next to me. "We've won."

I was too weak to answer.

→ TWENTY-NINE ←

It was a cold day in Oldking, with rain and wind pouring off the bay and chilling the crowd assembled in Royal Square.

Araneigh sat next to me, our hands clasped together in her lap. It was the first time I'd seen her since the battle—I'd spent the whole ride back in Baron Ede's carriage, unconscious. He had offered his own carriage to the wounded and had ridden on horseback to give us privacy. Astrin had ridden with me—Dam Alectoria had brought him back from death's door. We spent most of the ride talking about what had happened, how we felt. I'd misjudged him. He was a good young man. Maybe not good enough for Lane, but still a good young man.

Duchess Helte sat on the royal stage, an older woman with thin gray hair, whose gaze commanded authority. Alongside her sat Baron Ede, Baron Keikan, Sir Hamal, and Dam Alectoria. No brigands. No Ilthurians. Not even the merchant lords were allowed to grace the royal stage.

"It's no secret that I rode to Oldking to make a claim on the empty throne of Cekon," Helte said. She paused for effect. "I will not make that claim today. I still believe Cekon would do well to have a queen. I still believe I am qualified to rule. In light of what's happened, however, I don't believe it would be appropriate for me to make a claim at this time."

The crowd around me murmured. Since most of those around me were from the Order of the Vine, our murmurs were not particularly polite.

"A blight had spread its way across the kingdom. I had good reason to suspect the Order of the Vine, but I was not entirely correct in my suspicions. Only some of the blighters came from the ranks of the witches. Some of my own servants, some among the Brotherhood of Helte's Coin, betrayed my wishes in their fervor to elevate my position."

"She's lying," I whispered to Araneigh.

"I don't think nobility thinks about truth one way or the other," she whispered back. "They just say whatever accomplishes their goals."

"It is only appropriate, I believe, that I restore my duchy to its original

borders. I hereby relieve you of vassalage, Baron Keikan, and my fastest messengers ride for every other barony with the news. Furthermore, I am disbanding the Brotherhood of Helte's Coin."

A cheer went up at that. No one liked the tax knights.

"In their place, I hereby announce a new Order, the Order of the Duchy. It will be commanded by Sir Kalle of the Storm, hereafter known as Sir Kalle of the Storm and the Duchy. Sir Kalle?"

The giant man, the one who had ambushed us, walked onto the stage and bowed before Helte. She kissed him on each cheek and he returned to sit in the crowd.

"Nothing ever changes," Haim grumbled in front of me.

"Finally, while I cannot speak for the whole of Cekon, I would like to formally forgive the Order of the Vine for their role in this recent unrest. You are once again welcome on my lands."

Dam Alectoria gave a half nod, probably the closest she could bring herself to a polite acknowledgment.

Baron Keikan spoke next. "I too offer my forgiveness to the Order of the Vine. You are welcome on my lands."

Baron Ede stood up. He looked at Dam Alectoria for a moment, then turned to the crowd. "I cannot forgive the Order of the Vine," he said. He paused. "There is nothing to forgive. The Order has done no wrong. You are welcome on my lands."

We cheered at that.

Hex and Espen, disguised, sat behind us with a few other Ilthurians. Espen laughed a gallows laugh. There would be no forgiveness for the outlaw knights.

We met after the sun had set. Thirty of us, gathered in a rough circle on a cliff overlooking the bay. Squires, whelps, the youngest Ilthurians, and baby brigands. Though the Order of the Vine had been hard at work healing all the survivors of the battles, there were new scars. I wore the crescent moon on my cheek as a badge of pride, as did Araneigh. Lane, however, was perturbed by hers. Hex was nearly inconsolable.

The plan had been to meet up and play games. Instead, we told stories. We told stories about the battle, mostly. Some people told other stories, about adventures and perils. Most of the stories even sounded true.

Lane sat with her head in Astrin's lap as he recounted how he'd been saved by an Ilthurian who dragged him to safety.

I didn't tell my story. Araneigh did, though. I sounded a lot braver in her version of events than I would have in my own. I'd chewed the blighter's nose off and spat it into the fire, in her version.

"We should meet here every year," Astrin said. "On autumn equinox. Just, anyone who can. We should come here and meet so that we don't

forget. Because a lot of us aren't supposed to be friends with one another. Even if we drift apart, even if we end up at odds, I just … I don't want to forget that we stood together once. And maybe we still can."

Okay. Maybe he was good enough for Lane.

"What do we call ourselves?" a girl asked.

Lane hopped up to her feet and answered. "I think … I think we're the keepers of the empty throne."

A cheer went up.

We never played games that night. We watched the dark. We watched the sea. We watched each other. We held each other.

→ EPILOGUE ←

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Dam Lament asked. “You don’t need to.”

“I’m sure,” I said.

The first snow of the year fell on us, thick and damp, as we trudged up the side of the mountain.

Endsmeet sprawled out in the valley below us, a town of tents and cabins built along both banks of the Hargidin River. We’d been there a month already; we’d likely be there another three. It was a home. It was a home because my friends were there. It felt twice as much like a home because I wasn’t hiding anymore.

When we’d arrived, every witch of my covenant—even Dam Ilma, conflicted as she was—announced to the entire Order that I was a girl, and whether or not I sought to transform myself was my own business, and that anyone who attempted to make me feel unwelcome would face their wrath.

In all Dam Willow’s spellbooks and notes, we found nothing that told us how to work the spell to transform my body. But Dam Catkin knew, and she was probably alive somewhere. I would find her in time.

Most of Dam Willow’s notes had been about cage magic, and between those and her amulet, the crones had managed to lift the curse of blight from Haim and Daidi.

After half an hour of hiking, Dam Lament and I stopped in a birch grove. The ground was snowy, the trees white flecked with black. I was out of breath.

I laid out the bait. Two apples, mottled pale green and white. Lament took out a tiny vial from the pouch at her waist and held it up to the sun to peer through it. Black as tar. I knew why, now, since I’d watched her make it. Tar was the medium. That morning, she’d infused it with poppy seed and, most importantly, ley.

She passed it to me and I uncorked it. It smelled sweet, like rotten

fruit. I dipped a fingernail in, then dabbed a single drop on each apple.

"Great Mother, every child must sleep," Lament intoned. "Great Mother, every child must dream."

We stepped back from the trap and waited. I was cold, shivering a little under my sea-wool cloak. But mostly, I shook with nervous energy.

"Are you sure—" Dam Lament started.

"Shh," I cut her off.

A boar approached, his winter coat already thick, his mane pronounced. He sniffed the apples, and for a moment I thought he'd smell the trap and leave. He bit an apple. He chewed for a moment, then fell into sleep.

Dam Lament was more nervous than I was. She kept her spear tight in her hands, aimed at the beast, ready to step in if I woke it up by accident. If I faltered.

I knew, though, that I wasn't going to falter.

I walked up to the boar, drew my knife, and slit its throat. Hot red blood ran over my hands and destroyed the snow. I shook harder now.

The beast never woke up. It never knew it died.

We lashed it to a pole and started down the mountain, our footsteps slow and sure.

"You did well," Dam Lament said.

"I'm glad," I said. "I'm glad I proved to myself that I could do it."

I took another step, digging in with my heels to avoid slipping.

"Because I'm never going to do that again."

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